

# Journal of Islamic Philosophy

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# Principality of Existence and the Problem of Evil

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The problem of evil has been and remains one of the most important problems in philosophy and theology. The belief in God and the reality of evil result in certain paradoxes that those who believe in God are driven to try to resolve. The problem goes back as far as Epicurus (BC 341–270), who briefly stated the problem in these famous words: “Is he willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then he is impotent. Is he able, but not willing? Then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing? Whence then is evil?”<sup>1</sup>

In modern times, the face of the problem has changed; instead of denying some of the attributes of God, some began to use them to disprove the existence of God. J. L. Mackie’s viewpoint is well known.<sup>2</sup> Christianity focuses on the problem from the point of view of the “love of God,” while Muslim thinkers focus not on the love of God, but on divine theodicy, which differs from the Western enquiries. In this paper, I examine the problem and solution in Western thought, then introduce the Islamic reply in light of the philosophical foundation of Mulla Sadra’s philosophy, namely the “principality of existence” or “fundamental reality of existence.”

In Western thought, the problem was so critical that philosophies appeared in accordance with the solution. For example, the “process philosophy” of Whitehead and his followers brought philosophical views that annihilate the problem fundamentally. In process philosophy and theology, the power of God is not a coercive one, but a kind

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<sup>1</sup> See Louis Pojman, *Philosophy of Religion: An Anthology* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing, 1987), 151.

<sup>2</sup> J. L. Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism: Arguments for and against the Existence of God* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982).

of persuasion.<sup>3</sup> This view rejects the omnipotence of God; therefore the reality of evil is not the guilt of divine action.

More recently the problem was posed by David Hume (1711–1776), who argues through his persona Philo in *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* that not merely the fact of evil, but the enormous amount of evil make the existence of a deity dubious. In his opinion, it is arguable that there is actually more evil than good in the world, so it is hard to see how one can harmonize the crucial propositions.<sup>4</sup>

Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646–1716) tried to set forth a thorough-going theodicy. In his book, *The Theodicy*, he argues that the fact of evil in no way refutes theism. His answer to the kind of objection made by Hume is to contend that God permits evil to exist in order to bring about greater good and that Adam’s fall was a “happy sin” because it led to the incarnation of the Son of God, and raised humanity to a higher destiny than would otherwise have been the case.<sup>5</sup>

In a contemporary restatement of the problem designed to disprove the existence of God, the argument proceeds with the following premises:<sup>6</sup>

1. God is omnipotent, omniscient.
2. God is perfectly good.
3. Evil exists.

The result is:

1. If God (an all-powerful, omniscient, omnibenevolent being) exists, there would be no (or no unnecessary) evil in the world.
2. There is evil (or unnecessary evil) in the world.
3. Therefore, God does not exist.

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<sup>3</sup> David Ray Griffin, *God and Religion in the Postmodern World, Essays in Postmodern Theology* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), 65.

<sup>4</sup> David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (London: Longmans Green, 1878).

<sup>5</sup> G. W. Leibniz, *Theodicy*, trans. E. M. Huggard (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1985).

<sup>6</sup> Louis Pojman, *Philosophy of Religion: An Anthology* (Belmont CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1987), 327.

The main defense of theism in the light of evil is the free will defense, going back as far as St. Augustine (354–430),<sup>7</sup> and receiving modern treatment in the work of John Hick,<sup>8</sup> Alvin Plantinga,<sup>9</sup> and Richard Swinburne.<sup>10</sup> The free will defense<sup>11</sup> adds a fourth premise to Epicurus’s paradox in order to show that premises 1–3 are consistent and not contradictory:

4. It is logically impossible for God to create free creatures and guarantee that they will never do evil.

Since it is good to create free creatures that are morally responsible agents, there is no assurance that they will not also do evil. Proponents of the free will defense claim that all moral evil derives from a creature’s freedom of will. But how does the theist account for natural evil? Western thought has distinguished between two types of evil: moral and natural. “Moral evil” covers all those bad things for which humans are morally responsible. “Natural evil” includes those terrible events that occur in nature of their own accord, such as hurricanes, tornadoes, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, natural diseases, and so on, that cause suffering to humans and animals.

However, there are two different ways to solve the problem of natural evil: The first one, suggested by Alvin Plantinga, is to attribute natural evil to the work of the devil and his angels. The second way, favored by Swinburne, argues that natural evil is part and parcel of the nature of things, resulting from the combination of deterministic physical laws that are necessary for

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<sup>7</sup> Augustine, *The City of God* (New York: Image Books, Doubleday, 1958), book 11, 9.

<sup>8</sup> John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love* (London: Macmillan, 1977), 253–261.

<sup>9</sup> Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom and Evil* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1977).

<sup>10</sup> Swinburn, Richard, “The Problem of Evil,” in *Reason and Religion*, ed. Stuart C. Brown (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977), 90.

<sup>11</sup> Pojman, *Philosophy*, 153.

consistent action and the responsibility given to humans to exercise their freedom.<sup>12</sup>

### *The Principality of Existence*

The principality of existence will change our perspective about the reality of the world and the basic problem of evil. Mulla Sadra himself argued for divine theodicy and an omnibenevolent God in two parts of his book, the *Asfar*. In the seventh volume, he addresses issues posed by Western thinkers.<sup>13</sup>

In his first reply, his argument is as follows:

1. God is only the efficient cause of every finite substance (and nothing else).
2. Evil is not a substance and must be ascribed to nothingness.
3. Therefore, God is not the efficient cause of evil.

His other replies trace the following path:

1. Evil has no essence or being of its own; it is an accident for good beings; it is a privation of the essence or being of another. Evil has no form of its own and has no formal cause. Furthermore, evil is a relative characteristic.
2. God is not the direct efficient cause of evil. Metaphysical imperfection can occur only as a by-product of God's efficient causal activity.
3. Moral evil, which can and does affect the functioning of man's nature, is rooted in human freedom. God willed freedom (which is good) but creatures will evil.
4. The amount of evil in this kind of world is much less than the amount of good.

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<sup>12</sup> Richard Swinburn, *Providence and the Problem of Evil* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998).

<sup>13</sup> Sadra al-Din Muhammad Shirazi (Mulla Sadra), *al-Hikmat al-muta'aliyah fi'l-asfar al-aqliyyah al-arba'ah [al-Asfar, The Transcendent Wisdom Concerning the Four Intellectual Journeys of the Soul]* (Beirut: Dar Ihya al-Turath al-Arabiyya, 1981), 7:55–94.



5. The nature of man cannot be totally corrupted or man would no longer be human.
6. Man's metaphysical nature is not diminished to the point that he is no longer rationally and morally responsible for his action.
7. The grace of God enables man to overcome whatever propensities to evil he has, so that he is able not to sin.
8. The fact of finitude makes evil possible but not necessary. Corruption is possible because man is a corruptible creature. Only God is incorruptible.<sup>14</sup>

I think kind of reply, in the way of principality of quiddity, differs from Mulla Sadra's philosophical attitude. However, in the second volume of the *Asfar*, he offers another view about the nature of evil.<sup>15</sup> This reply is the direct conclusion from the principality of existence. Before studying his view, I will explain the principality or fundamental reality of existence, which is the turning point in Islamic philosophy.

According to Sadra the "notion of existence" is one of the best-known concepts. It is self-evident and reasonable by itself, because it is self-apparent and makes others apparent. There is no need for any other thing to make its notion clearer.<sup>16</sup>

But the deepest reality of existence is in the extremity of hiddenness.<sup>17</sup> Because its deepest reality is external, if its

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<sup>14</sup> Norman Geisler, *Philosophy of Religion* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Corp., 1974), 344–345.

<sup>15</sup> Mulla Sadra, *Asfar*, 2:352–356.

<sup>16</sup> Mulla Sadra, *Asfar*, 23–27, 68–69; and *al-Shawahid al-rububiyah* [*Divine Witnesses Concerning the Path of Spiritual Realization*] (Tehran: Soroush Publication, 1366/1987), 7–8; and *al-Masha'ir* [*The Book of Metaphysical Penetrations*] (Meshed, Iran: University of Meshed Publication, 1381/1961), 13–19. Also see also Mulla Hadi Sabzavari, *Sharh al-Manzumut fi al-hikmat*, trans. Mohaghegh Mehdi and Toshihiko Izutsu as *The Metaphysics of Sabzavari* (Tehran: University of Tehran Publication, 1326/1987), 31.

<sup>17</sup> Mulla Sadra, *al-Masha'ir*, 12.

reality comes to our mind as reality this would be a refusal of reality, because the reality insofar as it is reality—not its notion—must be external and outside the mind. Furthermore, if its reality were actualized in the mind—like the reality of fire—its effects also would also be actualized, and according to our example our mind must burn!

Mulla Sadra says, “The truth of existence is the clearest thing in appearance and presence; and its essence is the most hidden thing in grasping and understanding the depth of its reality.”<sup>18</sup>

### *Existence and Quiddity*

When we study certain evidence of reality, like the existence of “I,” the existence of “earth,” the existence of the “tree,” the existence of “whiteness” and so on, we realize that we have many conceptions of things like “tree,” “earth,” “I,” “whiteness” and so on, and each of them differs from the others. But in spite of their differences they have one similarity: “all of them exist and have reality outside the mind.” So we know that we have two notions of things, one of them is the notion of tree, whiteness, earth, etc., and the other is the notion of existence or reality that is connected to all of those notions. The first one, that is the thing-ness, is called “quiddity,” and the second one “existence.”

If we observe carefully we will realize that our mental concept of existence is contrary to the concept of things like tree, earth, whiteness, etc. to which we ascribe existence. Our reason abstracts quiddity—which is said in answer to the question what, by way of definition—from existence and conceives it, then ascribes existence to it in the mind. This means that existence is additional and like an accident to quiddity in the mind, and the concept of that existence is not the same as that of a quiddity or any part of it. This difference can be realized just by surveying our mind and its conception of existence and quiddity. There is

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<sup>18</sup> Mulla Sadra, *al-Shawahid*, 7–8.

no need to demonstrate it, but there is some demonstration for it that can be observed in detailed books on the subject.<sup>19</sup>

The “notion” of existence also has a univocal meaning. When we say “man exists,” “Brussels exists,” “the tree exists” and so on, the concept of “existence” in these sentences is the same. Although concepts of “human” and “Brussels” and “tree” are different, existence is predicated to each of them in the same meaning.<sup>20</sup>

### *Fundamental Reality (Principality) of Existence*

In some cases, when we ascribe something to another, there are external referents for each predicate and subject in the external world just as they have reality in the mind. For example, when we affirm that “this paper is white” or “this surface is square” or “that water is warm,” just as each word—paper, white, surface, square, water, and warm—has a special concept in the mind, so, in reality each one has a special and different reality. Although each reality is connected to another, like the reality of whiteness is connected to the reality of paper, at the same time, each one has its own reality and special applicability.

In certain other cases, when we predicate one predicate to a subject, the matter is not like this. In some cases each predicate does not have a special and different reality, there is no duality in reality between predicate and subject, and their unity can be found externally; so that multiplicity arises only from the mind. In other words, the mind divides one concrete unity into numerous matters with its analytical power; it produces different concepts and numerous meanings from one external reality that has no multiplicity outside the mind.

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<sup>19</sup> Muhammad Hoseyn Tabataba'ii, *Bedayat al-hikmah* [*The Beginning of Wisdom*] (Beirut: Dar al-Zahra, 1982), 13.

<sup>20</sup> Hamidreza Ayatollahy, *The Existence of God: Mulla Sadra's Seddiqin Argument versus Criticisms of Kant and Hume* (Tehran: Sadra Islamic Philosophy Research Institute Publication, 2005), 54–57.

One of those concrete units is quiddity and existence. When we say “the tree exists,” the subject and the predicate (the concept of tree and the concept of existence) certainly have multiplicity in the mind, and there is contrariety between them. As explained above, existence is additional to quiddity in the mind. But undoubtedly, this is not the case in the external or real world, so that one’s appearance is made by another, or one belongs to another. This is the mind, which makes two different concepts from those external units. In the real world, quiddity and existence like tree and the existence of the tree, or man and the existence of man are not two species of realities. How can one reality have two separate realities, consisting of itself and its existence or reality? Everything is identified with its existence externally and totally—this totality is in the mind—and constructs a unity. This duality is the result of the analytic power of the mind. In other words, both quiddity and existence are not fundamentally real.

On the other hand, both quiddity and existence cannot be unreal and be only mentally posited, just as both of them cannot be real. Because this leads to mere sophism that supposes that nothing is outside of us, and that there are no concrete things. Therefore either quiddity or existence can be fundamentally real because both of them can be neither fundamentally real nor unreal and mentally posited.

Some philosophers have the opinion that what is fundamentally real is quiddity, and there are quiddities of things in the concrete world; and the mind, by observing real things, abstracts concepts of existence from them. So existence is only a mental concept and it has no reality. This opinion at first appears to be true, and because of the strength of the mind, we think that in reality there are things and we have the notion of existence by abstraction.

But Mulla Sadra changed this philosophy with his view that in the external world there is only existence (its reality not its notion); and our minds, by observing the limitations of existence or reality, make some concepts of things different from each other. So, the fundamentally real is

existence and quiddity is mentally posited. This view is also called “principality of existence.”<sup>21</sup>

Now, we turn our attention to the problem of evil and see how Mulla Sadra’s fundamental reality of existence addresses this problem.

If we survey the evil in the world we realize that the problem of evil arises in the case of deficiencies and differences. Some people are more intelligent than others, some people have good eyesight while others are blind, and so on. Is it not possible for God to give everything the same favor? He has created humankind that suffers and is limited, while He is omnipotent and can give every person everything he needs without deficiency. If someone wishes his condition were better, or that evil be prevented, or desires those things that God has given to happy people, can he complain to God and ask why has He discriminated against him?

If we consider this from the viewpoint of those who believe in the principality of quiddity, perhaps the question is legitimate; because God can give every person more perfection, it is in His power. If God creates a person with some limitation, the person may want God to grant him more favor. But according to the principality of existence, this is not the thing-ness of something that God gave it. God brings into the existence, after the appearance of this part of existence, then the quiddity of the mind abstracts it from the limitation of existent being. There is no thing-ness in the world that God gives existence to. The differences of things are due to the type of limitations of existence that come from the multiplicity of our world. Because man is something that is necessarily in the material world and the material world must necessarily be

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<sup>21</sup> More about this subject can be found in: Mulla Sadra’s *Asfar* (p. 38), where he has a long chapter with a detailed explanation and demonstration. See also *al-Masha’ir*, 28–68, where he has seven arguments for the fundamental reality of existence. See also Tabataba’i, *Bedayat*, 14–16 and *Nihayat al-Hikmat* [The Ultimate Theosophy] (Tehran: n.p., 1363/1984), 21–48 and *Usuli falsafeh wa ravishi realism* [The Principles of Philosophy and Method of Realism] (Tehran: Intishirat Sadra, 1350/1971), 29–39.

multiple, there must be different existences that our minds abstract from different things. If the material situation of man is necessary for him and without it, there will be no man at all, then the differences between them is due to the essence of humanity. Perhaps the following explanation makes our purpose clearer:

All of us have heard of someone who wishes they wish someone else or in a better condition, or their father and mother were other than their real father and mother. Let's examine this scenario, to determine whether or not it is possible. For example, Tom wishes his father (A) and mother (B), who are not rich and intelligent, were other people, like Dick's father (A') and mother (B') who are both rich and intelligent. Tom thinks that if A' and B' were his father and mother he would have a better life. If he concentrates on the meaning of this proposition he will understand that this sentence is meaningless, because if his father and mother were other persons he would not be Tom. Tom is an existent man whose father and mother are A and B. If A' and B' are father and mother of a person he will not be Tom who wishes so, but this person is Dick who exists with his own character. Tom wants to preserve his characteristics that necessitate having A and B as his father and mother, and at the same time not have A and B as his parents. This is absurd. All of these are the necessary conditions for the existence of Tom.

Now is it not contradictory for God to create a man—who must necessarily differ from others because of the multiplicity of the material world—that is not a man, namely he does not differ from others. We are not people who are each given some different perfection. God has favored existence that in the material world must be multiple and limited existence with different limitations then the meaning of person after that arises, i.e. then the meaning of “we” appears by abstraction of our mind. We-ness is not first, then given existence, rather there are existences that we-ness is realized from.

Mulla Sadra argues that the aspect of goodness and the unity of things is due to existence and the aspect of evil and differences of things are quiddities. Therefore, every

goodness is attributed to God and every evil is from having quiddity (which is not real), which is a result of being in the low level (in terms of perfection) of existence.