

Lesson 24: Evil and the Best Order

One of the perennial central discussions in theology is the question of evil which is talked about in different topics. One of the topics in which it is discussed is the Divine Unity (*tawḥīd*) in creatorship (*khḷiqiyyah*) because the dualists believe in two creators, viz. the creator of good and the creator of evil, and we have examined this matter in our discourses on the Divine Unity.

Another topic in which it is discussed is the question of the Divine justice which is approached from diverse perspectives. Sometimes it is through the angle of the cosmic justice and the best order of existence and at times through the outlook of the goal-orientedness of the universe and that the philosophy behind the world of nature is that the human being benefits from it while natural evils also inflict him.

Sometimes it is through the viewpoint that in the theistic worldview, some of the undesirable happenings are a result of man's actions while these consequences usually affect not only the wrongdoers but the others as well. These are various cases in which 'evil' is mentioned as something in conflict with the justice of God (cosmic as well as retributory justice), and the Muslim philosophers and theologians have examined and resolved it through their respective ways.

In view of the broadness of the scope of this topic, we shall examine and analyze it in two lessons.

The Skepticism on Evil and the Best Order

We have mentioned in an earlier lesson the proof of the best order. The skepticism on evil in this regard holds that evil – natural, moral or human evil – is in conflict with the excellence of the order of nature and that the best order demands that the universe must be free from evil.

Reply [to the Skepticism]

In reply to this skepticism on evil in relation to the best and most perfect order, the theosophers have embarked on the examination of the hypothetical kinds of the possible being (*mawjūd al-mumkin*) from the perspective of good and evil, and on the basis of the Divine providence (*inṣāyah*) and wisdom

(ʿikmah), they have concluded that only two kinds of it can be materialized; one is pure good while the other is the dominant and much good, but the materialization of other assumptions such as equal good and evil, dominant and much evil and pure evil is impossible.

Meanwhile, since pure evil means pure non-existence and sheer nullity and that the assumption of existence in this case is to assume two contradictory things, the equality of its evil with its goodness or its evil as more dominant than its goodness is in conflict with the Divine providence which necessitates the best order. This is incompatible with a being whose goodness is more dominant than its evil, for the non-existence of more dominant goodness due to some evil is in itself a manifestation of more dominant evil, and this is incompatible with the Divine providence and wisdom. [1](#)

The Non-discernment of Evil in the Realm of Nature

Apart from the Necessary Being by essence (*wājib al-wujūd bi 'dh-dhāt*) what possess reality or existence are the two realms; one is the realm of non-material (*mufarīq*) and incorporeal (*mujarrad*) beings, and the other is the realm of nature and material beings. Manifestations of evil (*shurʿ*) surface in the realm of nature and material beings only because the nature of evil is absence or non-existence (*ʿadam*) – the absence or non-existence of what is desirable and contingent for a thing – and it is either the absence of the primary perfection (the archetype) or that of the secondary perfection. In any case, non-existence is a characteristic of a material thing and it pertains to matter and possibility (dispositional possibility or *imkān-e istiʿdād*).

Therefore, such non-existence which is the origin and source of evil has no place except in the physical realm. In this regard, ‘Allāmah al-ʿababābī’ has said:

“Evil, corruption and their likes are all undesirable and unwanted things which can be found in the physical realm; likewise, the concept of “bad” or “undesirable” is a concept which arises in contrast to the “good” or “desirable”. Had there been no wellbeing or good health which our physical beings desire, we would have never regarded illness as bad, and had there been no comfort and security and any of the carnal or sensual pleasures, losing any of them would have never been painful for us or be considered a misfortune, just as we never regard the evenness of the number “four” or the oddness of the number “three” as good or bad, good luck or bad luck because there is no point of comparison.

It thus becomes clear that “evil” is an analogical matter and a non-existential concept in contrast to an attainable existential matter. That is, regarding evil, there must be a subject with an existential quality such that its desirability must be assumed and the absence of this quality of desirability from it would be regarded as “evil”. For instance, the human being’s possession of eyes is good. (Naturally, he wants to have eyes and it is also possible for him not to have them.) On the contrary, blindness is treated as “evil” for him.

And as a conclusion of this examination, we arrive at the point that “evil” – wherever it is – first and

foremost, is a non-existential (*‘adam*), and secondly, a potential (*imkan*) matter.²

To elaborate, physical existents are constituted by [certain] abilities and potentials, and they gradually acquire the existential perfections which may be possible for them. This gradual development depends on the mutual interaction among the physical existents, for each of the natural species has peculiar defects and perfections which are acquired through many other natural phenomena, and it is here that a sort of clash or conflict arises, and as a result, relative or subjective evil comes into being.

In other words, the ability of matter to assume various forms, on one hand, and the contradiction of one form with another, on the other hand, are an element of destruction as well as construction, an agency for both extinction and origination, [an instrument of] wiping out the past as well as building the future, [a means of] taking out old forms and images and bringing out new portraits. As long as the members and elements do not clash with each other and do not influence each other, no average disposition or new combination will emerge. Thus, it is correct for us to say that “Contradiction is the source of good and the balancer of the universe, and the order in the universe is based on it.”³

In a discussion on the manner of involvement of evil in the Divine decree, *‘Adr al-Muta’alihin* has thus said:

“The materialization of non-finite beings or existents which necessitates the Divine providence necessitates the existence of transubstantiation (*istiḥ*) and contradiction (*taḥ*) in the world of generation and corruption (*‘alam-e kawn wa fasād* or the realm of nature), for without contradiction, generation and corruption will not be materialized, and without generation and corruption, in turn, non-finite animal and human existents and beings would not have existed. Meanwhile, the contradiction of qualities and forms is one of the properties of physical beings and is expedient for their interaction and not the independent action of the agent (naturally and accidentally made and not originally made). It is thus correct to say, thus:

“Had there been no contradiction, the emanation of existence would not have continued from the Origin of existence; the Divine existence and bestowal would have been suspended; the realm of nature would have been in a standstill from possessing life through which it attains its goal; and most of the existents which could possibly emerge in the ulterior of possibility and non-existence would have remained.”⁴

In *Imām ‘Alī’s* (*‘a*) sermon on the Divine Unity (*khutbat al-tawḥīd*), he has also mentioned the principle of contradiction governing the realm of nature:

ضَادَّ النُّورَ بِالظُّلْمَةِ، وَالْوُضُوحَ بِالْبُهْمَةِ، وَالْجُمُودَ بِالْبَلَلِ، وَالْحَرُورَ بِالصَّرَدِ. مُؤَلَّفَ بَيْنَ مُتَعَادِيَاتِهَا، مُقَارِنَ بَيْنَ مُتَبَايَنَاتِهَا، مُقَرَّبَ بَيْنَ مُتَبَاعِدَاتِهَا، مُفَرِّقَ بَيْنَ مُتَدَانِيَاتِهَا.

“He has made light the contrary of darkness, brightness that of gloom, dryness that of moisture and heat that of cold. He produces affection among inimical things. He fuses together diverse things, brings near

remote things and separates things which are joined together.”⁵

In his *Mathnawī-ye Ma‘nawī*, Mawlānā Rūmī has mentioned the issue of subsistence of natural life on the basis of contradiction, saying:

این جهان جنگ است چون کل بنگری زره زره همچو دین با کافری

آن یکی زره همی پرد به چپ و آن دگر سوی یمین اندر طلب

این جهان زین جنگ قائم می بود در عناصر در نگر تا حل شود

بس بنای خلق بر اضداد بود لاجرم جنگی شد اندر ضر و سود

When you consider, this world is all at strife,

Mote with mote, as religion with infidelity.

One mote is flying to the left,

*And another to the right in search.*⁶

This world is maintained by means of this war:

*Consider the elements, in order that it may be solved.*⁷

Hence the edifice of creation is upon contraries;

*Consequently we are at war for well-being and woe.*⁸

And Rūmī has also said:

زندگانی آشتی ضدهاست مرگ آن کاندر میانشان جنگ خاست

صلح اضداد است عمر این جهان جنگ اضداد است عمر جاودان

Life is the peace of contraries;

*Death is the fact that war arose between them.*⁹

Thus far, the conclusion of the discussion is that relative evil is indispensable to the physical beings and caused by the contradiction governing the realm of nature, and this contradiction is also a necessary or essential requisite of development and required by the Divine justice, wisdom and providence: [10](#)

إِذْ مُقْتَضَى الْحِكْمَةِ وَالْعِنَايَةِ إِضْطَالُ كُلِّ مُمْكِنٍ لِعَايَةِ

The Beauty of the Totality or the Perfect System

Another point which must be given attention in reply to the misgiving on evil from the perspective of excellence of the natural order is the principle of the realm of nature's organicness which has been given attention by the theosophers since the ancient history of philosophy. According to this [principle], the universe is an indivisible unit whose components have ontological and real relationship with one another.

As a result, correct judgment on its excellence depends on the examination of all beings and the whole system, and in the whole system and overall equilibrium, the existence of inferior and superior, ups and downs, darkness and light, suffering and pleasure is essential, and it must be said that

خهان چون خط و خال و چشم و ابروست که هر چیزی بجای خویش نیکوست

اگر نیک و بدی بینی مزن دم که هم ابلیس میباید هم آدم

And it is also right to say that

ابروی کج ار راست بدی کج بودی

If your eyebrows were straight, you were defective.

And

از شیر حمله خوش بود و از غزال رم

What was pleasant in the lion was its attack and in the gazelle its being scared. [11](#)

Objection

In the physical beings, it is not correct to say that goodness dominates over evil, for on top of them are the human beings, and on account of committing undesirable acts and being afflicted with moral vices and crooked beliefs, most of them are manifestations of severe wickedness.

Since the worldly life is temporary and the Hereafter is an eternal abode and that the said individuals deserve to incur the Divine wrath and be deprived of the everlasting felicity, the otherworldly outcome of their lives is chastisement and evil. Though they may have lives of animalistic pleasure in this world, they will become insignificant compared to the punishment in the Hereafter.

Reply

In terms of theoretical and practical perfections, the human beings are of three types:

- (1) those who have attained the highest level of perfection in both aspects,
- (2) those who are in the lowest level and lack any kind of theoretical or practical perfection, and
- (3) those who are situated between these two extremes and diverse levels in both aspects.

It is obvious that most people belong to the third group. Relative to the total number of people, the second group is lesser in number and the eternal damnation in the final abode belongs to the second group, and the rest, even if they incur punishment, will finally be admitted to the vast door of the Divine mercy. [12](#)

Second Objection

Why did God not create the world of nature in such a way that there is not even a speck of atom in it and it is purely good?

Reply

The said assumption is rationally impossible because its implication is that the material being is both material and immaterial at the same time for in terms of materialization of existential perfections possible for it, there are only two possibilities for it. One [possibility] is that the said perfections are acquired by it actually (*bi 'l-fi'l*). This refers to the absolutely immaterial being (such as non-material intellect (*'aql-e maf'riq*)). The other [possibility] is that its perfections are not acquired actually. This type is either material being or non-absolute non-material being (such as the spirit (*nafs*)).

The state of these two types of contingent being, therefore, is an open circuit of creation and non-creation. But to assume that the second type would exist while being gradually evolving (*tadr'ij al-wuj'd*)

and actually deserving its perfections – like the assumption that the first type is gradually evolving and actually not deserving its perfections – necessitates contradictions, and it is impossible.

Moreover, since non-creation of the second type which is the manifestation of the dominant good necessitates dominant evil and giving preference to dominant evil over dominant good is unthinkable for the Wise Agent, creation of the realm of nature which necessitates less evil is in itself concomitant to the Divine justice and wisdom. [13](#)

Evil and the All-encompassing Power of God

A Western philosopher [14](#) regards the existence of evil in the realm of nature as incompatible with the all-encompassing power of God and His absolute goodness and graciousness, saying that the question of evil in its simplest form is as follows: (1) God is the Omnipotent; (2) God is absolutely gracious; and (3) yet, evil exists. These three cases are in conflict with the main components of most theological views. For instance, if two of these cases are true, the third will be definitely false. Then, in explaining the contradiction among them, he has thus stated:

- a. Good is the opposite of evil such that a well-wisher tries to remove evil as much as he can, and
- b. The powers of the Omnipotent Being know no bounds and limits.

These two premises necessitate that if one is absolutely gracious as well as omnipotent, he will totally get rid of evil. As such, the two cases – “There is the omnipotent” and “Evil exists” – are contradictory.

This misgiving is caused by the failure to consider a rational and intrinsic principle, and that is the discussion about the ability or inability of the agent and his being good or evil depends on whether the subject is essentially and practically possible or essentially and practically impossible; otherwise, the problem is with the other party and not with the agent.

If we would not take this rational principle into consideration, the misgiving cannot be confined on the question of evil as it will also be applied to all cases of impossibility such as bringing two contradictories together, law of non-contradiction, negation of a thing by itself, the circle’s possession of four sides, etc. These will be raised in comparison to the principle of God’s absolute power or omnipotence.

Meanwhile the solution to the misgiving on contradictions in all these cases is to pay attention to the said rational and intrinsic principle. Definitely, Mr. Mackie does not consider the impossibility of a drawing to be square and circle at the same time as the reason for his ability to do so, and he will argue that he can draw both shapes. However, the materialization of the said two shapes by means of a single agent at the same time is essentially impossible, and impossibility is beyond the sphere of ability.

Such is the discussion on the question of evil in the realm of nature. A material being that is associated with contingency (*imkān*), capacity (*isti’dād*) and gradation (*tadrīj*) cannot be devoid of evil. As

explained earlier, the state of such a being is an open circuit of existence and non-existence, and to assume an existence without evil is tantamount to assuming two contradictory matters. ‘Allāmah al-‘Abdāb’ has expressed this subject in this way:

“When analyzed, this notion is like asking, ‘Why did the God of matter and nature not set matter and nature as immaterial?’ Any existent that has no possibility of having or not having perfection cannot be a material being. If this universe does not have the quality that each of its components can transform into something else and under certain conditions it can find its existential interests and without which it would be miserable and static, it follows that this universe is not material.” [15](#)

It is appropriate here to cite Imām ‘Alī’s (‘a) statement in reply to this question: “Can God who, according to the monotheists, is capable of doing everything, place the world without making it small inside a chicken egg without making it bigger?”

In reply to the said question, the Imām (‘a) said: [16](#)

إِنَّ اللَّهَ تَبَارَكَ وَتَعَالَى لَا يُنْسَبُ إِلَى الْعَجْزِ، وَالَّذِي سَأَلْتَنِي لَا يَكُونُ

It must be noted that the phrase “as much as he can” in Mackie’s first premise is not correct. What is correct is “as much as possible” which means that the Agent who is absolutely gracious will remove evil as much as possible which is not tantamount to impossibility. It is clear that no objection can be raised against this proposition.

Review Questions

1. Prove that evil has no contradiction with the excellence of the order of nature.
2. Write down the reason why good is inseparable with evil in the realm of nature.
3. Write down ‘Adr al-Muta’alihin’s statement concerning the nature of evil’s place in the Divine decree.
4. Write down the statement of the Commander of the Faithful (Imām ‘Alī) (‘a) regarding the principle of contradiction governing the realm of nature.
5. Write down along with its refutation the objection on the inability of good to dominate evil in the world of creation.
6. Why did God not create the realm of nature in such a way that there is not the least evil and there would be absolute goodness?

7. Write down along with its refutation the notion of incompatibility of the existence of evil in the realm of nature with the all-encompassing power of God.

1. See Nihāyat al-ʿIlm, stage (marʿalah) 12, chap. 18.
2. Uṣūl-e Falsafeh, vol. 5, p. 172; See also Nihāyat al-ʿIlm, stage (marʿalah) 12, chap. 18.
3. ʿAdl-e Ilāhī (Divine Justice), 8th ed., p. 214.
4. Asfār al-Arbaʿah, vol. 7, p. 77.
5. Nahj al-Balaghah, Sermon 186.
6. Nicholson (trans.), Mathnawī-ye Maʿnawī, Book 6, lines 36–37.
7. Ibid., line 47.
8. Ibid., line 50.
9. Ibid., Book 1, line 1293.
10. Fakḥm Sabziwārī, Sharḥ-e Manṣūmah, “Al-ʿIllat wa ʿl-Maʿlūl,” “Ghurar fī ʿl-Mabʿath ʿAn al-Ghāyah.”
11. Murtaḥḥ Muḥahharī, ʿAdl-e Ilāhī (Divine Justice), 8th ed., pp. 179–183.
12. Sharḥ al-Ishārāt, vol. 3, pp. 325–328; Asfār al-Arbaʿah, vol. 7, pp. 79–80.
13. Sharḥ-e Ishārāt, vol. 3, p. 328.
14. It refers to John Leslie Mackie (1917–81) in the article “Evil and Absolute Power” in Kalām-e Falsafī, pp. 145–170.
15. Uṣūl-e Falsafeh wa Rawish-e Realism, vol. 5, p. 173.
16. Shaykh al-ʿAdāq, Al-Tawḥīd, section (bāb) 9, ʿadāth 9, p. 130.

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