

The Philosophy behind Suffering

One of the issues engaging the mind of man since the distant past is the existence of suffering, which is apparently pointless and futile. The presence of evil and suffering in our world is undeniable. Everyone has encountered and experienced them in their various forms in his life. Life without anguish or pain, and happiness without grief exist only in the imagination. But the reality is a mixture of the two (happiness and loneliness).

Concerning suffering there are mainly two fundamental questions. The first is, what is the origin of suffering and from where does it emerge? The other is whether agony and pain are concordant with the justice and mercy of God.

All the religious people of the world should answer these two questions. If God is the Lone Creator of the world and the Manifestation of goodness, then where have all these miseries come from? Can the God of Goodness be the agent of misery and just as He creates, can also destroy? Acknowledgment of the fact that the One God is the sole origin of all creations—even those events that are seemingly evil—was enigmatic for many. Thus, most of them would follow the path of polytheism and, like the Manuians,[228] believed in at least two deities. As narrated by Paulo Cuello, the great soothsayer who believed in various gods, when he heard the claim of Prophet Ilyās (‘a) that God is One, he asked in mockery: “Do you want to say that according to your belief, the same God that sends the storm also makes the wheat grow even though these two things are poles apart?”[229]

The other point is that in the teachings of all religions, God has been described as the Absolute Power, Absolute Authority, Most Gracious, and Most Merciful. These attributes are apparently discordant with the existence of miseries.

Various philosophical and ethical answers to these queries have already been given. After much experience and meditation, [Siddhartha Gautama] Buddha arrived at the Four Noble Truths, the first of which is the existence of suffering in the world and its inevitability.[230] Then he, who did not believe in monotheism [*tawhīd*] in its Abrahamic sense, presented a most detailed analysis of the phenomenon of

suffering and recommended certain ways on how to be completely released from it.[231]

But, though the first question seems more philosophical, it is the second question that has occupied the minds to a greater extent; and that is the ethical aspect of suffering. Are all these miseries in the world acceptable? Could not the existing world have been better than this? Are all these sufferings compatible with the justice, omniscience, and omnipotence of God? If there is a being other than God who could create another world, could he (the being other than God) have been able to cause a world better than this one to appear? Is the poet's following assertion valid?

گر بر فلکم دست بُدی چون یزدان برداشتمی من این فلک را ز میان

وز نو فلکی دیگر چنان ساختمی کآزاده به کام دل رسیدی آسان

*If like the Creator I had only dominion over the heaven,
I would have taken away this heaven.
And then a new heaven would I make;
As you can easily have whatever your heart dictates.*

One of the most ancient and famous writings about suffering is the Book of Job in the Old Testament. We have all heard about the story of Prophet Job [Ayyūb] (‘a). The Glorious Qur’an briefly points to the story of his life and states that Job (‘a) fell ill but chose patience, and tasted the pain of suffering until he attained a pleasant end. According to the Qur’an, Job (‘a) experienced such suffering that he raised his hands in supplication and sought God’s assistance. His prayer was granted and regained whatever he had lost. God mentions Job (‘a) as a patient servant.[232]

The story of Job (‘a) is narrated more elaborately in the Judeo-Christian sources. In the Book of Job in which the different dimensions have been discussed and explained, it is narrated that Job (‘a) was an affluent and influential man, and the fame of his wealth and power was known everywhere:

Job (‘a) had seven sons, three daughters, and possessing seven thousand sheep, three thousand camels, five hundred cows, five hundred she-donkeys, and innumerable servants. He was being acknowledged as the richest man of the entire district.[233]

Job (‘a) was an upright person and a philanthropist. He used to help the needy and cater to their needs. One day God extolled Job (‘a) before an assembly of angels and said, “Nobody like him can be found on earth. He is an honest and God-fearing man and keeps away from sin.”[234]

Satan who was present in that assembly said in protest, if fearing God was not of benefit to him, he

would not have done so. Thou hast kept Job (‘a), his family and possession safe from every predator. Thou hast multiplied his earnings and bestowed abundant wealth on him. Take away his possession from him; then Thou wilt behold that he openly blasphemes Thee.[235]

In this manner, the great trial for Job (‘a) commenced and Satan was granted the permission to do whatever he liked to him except exercising domination over his body and mind. As a consequence, tribulations occurred one after another. All the possessions of Job (‘a) were lost. His children died. He, himself, became afflicted with an ailment and suffered intense physical agony. He was expelled from his community. His friends forgot him and even his wife assailed him. Yet, he patiently endured all these adversities.

In spite of this, three of his friends approached him and rubbed salt into his wounds. They believed that these tribulations served as punishment for the sins of Job (‘a) and he was now paying for his sinful past. They urged Job (‘a) to repent for his sins so that God would forgive him. However, Job (‘a) insisted that he had committed no sin and that these happenings and tribulations had no relation whatsoever to his alleged commission of sins.

This dialogue is one of the most elegant and profound conversations pertaining to human suffering. It presents the diverse views on evil and its origin. In short, those three could not convince Job (‘a) that he was a sinner. God cured him; restored to him his lost properties, endowed him with other children in the place of his deceased ones, and inspired the three to apologize to Job (‘a). In this way, Job (‘a) recovered his lost social standing. Everybody realized that the ordeals are not the result of his sinfulness. Rather, these had been only a trial to prove the unflinching faith of Job (‘a).

This notwithstanding, the question of the need for good men to suffer is still open to debate. This question and many other similar ones have been discussed for hundreds of years. Through an analysis of the nature and essence of mischief and evil [*sharr*] (as what Plato did) and its benefits (as what St. Augustine did), everyone has tried to address these questions that are just as debatable and can be pondered upon.[236]

The question at this juncture with which we have to deal is this: Is the existence of all these sufferings and evils in the world ethical and compatible with the sublime attributes of God or not? This question can be answered from two perspectives. One is from the perspective of faith and through the acceptance of the principles of religion [*usul ad-din*] and submission to them. It is from this perspective that the believer says that the entire universe and all its components are creations of God, one of Whose Attributes is Wisdom. All the actions of the Wise are full of wisdom.

Thus, there is wisdom in suffering and evil in it as well. Although we are not able to comprehend the secret behind so many evils, this ignorance of ours does not mean that they lack wisdom. It only shows how ignorant we are, and that our knowledge is not so considerable in relation to the things unknown to us and that we have taken only a cup from the ocean of knowledge.[237]

But this answer does not convince all minds and, accordingly, for some it is a challenging one. Through reflection on the essence of the world, and the phenomenon of suffering and its function, they try to give a more elaborate answer to the question. In reality, they admit the wisdom behind the act of God but seek the hidden wisdom in suffering and its function. As a consequence, it is owing to this kind of view and reflection that the subject of divine justice has been one of the most sensational subjects of scholasticism and philosophy. It is the field for testing the capability of the human mind.

By relying on a tradition which tries to elucidate the issue of evil [*sharr*], Imam Khomein², in acknowledging the philosophical principles that consider the existence of evils as inevitable, attempts to show the ethical aspect of evil. His viewpoint will be made clear through a survey of the following points:

- Evil as relative;
- Evil as constructive;
- The hereafter as the place for reward; and
- Suffering as commensurate to one's own understanding

Evil as relative

We human beings view the world from the standpoint of our own interests, evaluating and classifying everything on the basis of its benefit and detriment to us. We never view the world as bare, exactly as it is and separate from us. This point will be more vivid especially with regard to the phenomena that are interwoven with our fate. To cite an example, we identify some of the plants as 'weed'.

This classification does not convey anything about its nature; it only shows our judgment regarding it. Now, if one would ask us, what is weed, our answer would be that weed is a plant which has no benefit, or grows spontaneously in our garden and orchard. But these answers indicate only one thing and that is the fact that we have named this plant on the basis of its benefits and harm to us. Thus, if assuming that a virtue is discovered in some of these weeds, our classification is immediately changed.

That is why Emerson,^[238] an American thinker and poet, asks: "What is 'weed'?" He himself answers: "It is a plant whose benefits have not yet been discovered." In this example we clearly see that the remarks are not about identity, and that it is not obvious what weed is. 'Weed' is a value-laden concept and belongs to the domain of the human mind. Professor Izutsu cites the same example and analyzes it in this manner:

To cite an example, consider the term, 'weed'. Dictionaries have usually defined this term in this way: 'It is a wild plant that grows everywhere.' In other words, it is unwanted and undesirable. However, in the exact real world, that is, in the natural world, nothing exists that is unwanted or undesirable; it only exists in the viewpoint of man who views the endless things of the complex nature, classify them, categorize them, and give them different values on the basis of their purposes.[239]

Thus, our view on the universe is not a neutral one; in most cases we identify and categorize things on the basis of our own interests. Of course, the point here is not individual interests but the interests of mankind as such. That is to say, man considers everything beneficial to him as good and detrimental as bad. Well, with this analysis in mind, let us proceed to the subject of evil [*sharr*] and examine, basically, what evil [*sharr*] is. Whatever description of evil and suffering is presented pertains to man.

That is, it is only in relation to man that evil finds meaning. What we mean by evil—be it natural or ethical—is a phenomenon which, in both cases, bring suffering into our lives in one way or another, or endangers and frighten us. We regard destructive floods as evil since they can cut off our means of communications, ruin our harvests, destroy our houses, and finally, endanger our lives. But aside from the danger the flood brings to us and our interests, it can no longer be deemed 'evil'. Rather it will only be viewed merely as a natural phenomenon. This is also true with respect to dangerous animals.

We think about poisonous reptiles such as venomous snake as dangerous and evil since it is possible that they can kill us with their fangs; however, this same poisonous fang is the most important factor in the protection of the snake's life and the continuity of its species. So, this 'evil' is 'good' for the snake. Of course, it can be asked, "Basically, what is the benefit of this 'evil' to us?" "Its non-existence is better than its existence!"

Although an elaborate reply to this inquiry could be given and proved that they constitute a part of this very same order of nature, and that their presence is necessary, we can, here, give a brief and adequate answer which is that the question itself is rooted in man's self-centeredness. Man views all the creatures within the framework of his interests and then asks what good or necessity does the existence of venomous snakes have. It is enough that the universe be viewed from the perspective of the venomous snakes. Then, this question for the snakes arises: "What is the necessity or benefit for nature of the existence of this two-footed creature (man) who is always in the pursuit of killing snakes and whose existence is entirely evil?" Then, we would observe that our viewpoint in relation to nature is a one-sided and value-laden one.

Once we understand this point well, we will realize that in many cases the things we think 'evil' is only 'evil' as far as we are concerned, and once the outlook is changed we will discern it to be good. In addition to the fact that the outlook of mankind on nature is such, the outlook of each and every individual also has this peculiarity. We have heard the old story of two neighbours. One was a farmer while the other was a potter. The farmer exerted all his efforts for one whole year and cultivated much of

the land. The potter also made a lot of earthenware.

Thereafter, the farmer would always pray and ask God for rain to pour down from the sky so that his produce would be abundant. On the other hand, afraid of the rain, the potter, raising his hands up to the sky, asked God for clear skies and bright sunlight. The sun for the former neighbour is 'evil', whereas for the latter, rain is always so. As a result these two have associated good and evil with their own interests and evaluated them with respect to themselves; duly naming them as 'good' or 'evil'.

This is what is meant by subjectiveness or relativity of evil. If there is no human judgment, no phenomenon can be termed 'evil'. But as soon as human judgment intervenes—the judgment being based as it is on the benefits and interests of man—the issue of evil appears. Thus, nothing is absolutely evil, that is, *per se* and in relation to itself. Instead, it is only when it is evaluated that it is called 'evil' by us. So, evil is that which is discordant with our interests. In this sense, evil will be subjective and relative. On the other hand, since our interests change with a change in circumstances it is possible that what was evil yesterday is good today and vice-versa.

As a result, in this sense evil would also be relative. Let us assume that you have an appointment with one of your bosom friends. However, before you leave your house to visit him, an unexpected guest arrives and hinders this supposed visit. This guest is reckoned as something bad [*sharr*]. But, after making the appointment if something happened that discouraged you from meeting him and you were looking for an excuse to cancel the appointment the guest's arrival, in such a case, would be good for you.

We have heard about the story of an ugly husband whose wife was not showing pleasant gesture to him. One midnight the wife heard the sound of a thief's steps, and fear-stricken, clung to her husband. After realizing that the reason for this extraordinary and unusual love of his wife was nothing but the presence of the thief, he welcomed him saying, "You are welcome to take whatever you want."

Thus, evil is relative in both senses. That is, it is evaluated and labeled from the human point of view, and also because of our interests' being variable, it may happen that yesterday's evil is today's good, and yesterday's good, today's evil:

پس بد مطلق نباشد در جهان بد به نسبت باشد، این را هم بدان

در زمانه هیچ زهر و قند نیست که یکی را پا، دگر را بند نیست

مر یکی را پا، دگر را پایبند مر یکی را زهر و بر دیگر چو قند

زهرِ مار، آن مار را باشد حیات نسبتش با آدمی باشد ممات

خلق آبی را بود دریا چو باغ خلق خاکی را بود آن، مرگ و داغ

همچنین برمشمرای مرد کار! نسبت این، از یکی کسی تا هزار

زید اندر حق آن شیطان بود در حق شخص دگر سلطان بود

آن بگوید: زید صدیق سنی است وین بگوید: زید گبرِ کُشتنی است

گر تو خواهی کو تو را باشد شکر پس ورا از چشمِ عشاقش نگر

Hence there is no absolute evil in the world:

Evil is relative. Know this (truth) also.

In (the realm of) Time there is no poison or sugar

That is not a foot (support) to one and a fetter (injury) to another—

To one a foot, to another a fetter;

To one a poison and to another (sweet and wholesome) like sugar.

Snake–poison is life to the snake,

(But) it is death in relation to man.

The sea is as a garden to the water–creatures;

To the creatures of earth it is death and a (painful) brand.

Reckon up likewise, O man of experience,

(Instances of) this relativity from a single individual to a thousand.

Zayd, in regard to that (particular) one, may be a devil,

(But) in regard to another person he may be a (beneficent) sultan.

That one will say that Zayd is an exalted siddiq (saint),

And this one will say that Zayd is an infidel who ought to be killed.

If you wish that to you he should be (as) sugar,

Then look on him with the eye of lovers. [240]

Nonetheless, relativity of evil has a more profound philosophical meaning. We have read a lot that this planet earth is the locus of movement and change, which the Imam termed as “the abode of

change, transition, and annihilation.”[241]

In this world, nothing is fixed and static; all things are in the process of transformation. Every phenomenon in this world moves toward its own perfection. God created every phenomenon in such a way that it moves on the basis of its own creational [*takwīn*] and essential [*sirīshat*] guidance.

Yesterday’s seed is today’s tree; yesterday’s embryo is today’s fetus and today’s fetus is tomorrow’s newborn baby—this cycle continues unabatedly. Yet, this process naturally engenders contradiction and duality. A fetus which wants to become a newborn baby should abandon its fetal state whereupon its metamorphosis would become perfect. In order to become a tree the seed should break out of its peel. So as to have permanent and complete teeth, the child should lose his baby teeth. A youngster, who likes to be independent in his life, should reduce his dependence on his family and accept the responsibility that freedom entails. All these transformations are bound to suffering.

No fetus is born without suffering, and no seed transformed into a fruitful tree. A youth who wants to have a muscular and well-proportioned body should get used to the pain of doing workouts with cold iron bars, and bear the pain of lactic acid accumulation in his muscles. He should also endure extreme muscle fatigue for some time. A butterfly should live inside its cocoon for a period of time to let its beautiful wings grow and prepare it for a new plane. In this sense, no movement and contact is possible without suffering and release from the existing condition. This famous saying of Mullā Sadrī testifies to this truth: “If there were no contradiction, the grace of the Merciful Fountainhead would not be obtained.”[242]

No one can deny this reality. A pupil of yesterday who wants to be a university student of today should accept the pain of being far away and separated from high school friends so as to establish contact with new friends and a new environment. Therefore, not only is every phenomenon involved with its own past in its path to perfection, but also it sometimes encounters other phenomena that hinder its perfection. It is here that an all-out conflict ensues—an inevitable and blessed battle in which neither adversary is totally defeated. The Imām examines evil from this perspective and says:

[All] the evils, catastrophes, death, disease and destructive events and troublesome creatures and other such things which are in this world of nature and this narrow pit of darkness arise from the interferences and conflicts between existents, not from the aspects pertaining to Being but on account of the deficiency of their ambiance and the narrowness of their abode.[243]

As such, evil in this sense is also relative (subjective). That is, every happening that takes place is evil for some while good for others. A person falling down and breaking his leg is an ‘evil’ event for him. Yet, this same unpleasant happening is good for the bonesetters and orthopaedists since their occupations are connected to these kinds of ‘evil’. However, the Imām goes beyond this point and believes that evil is not only relative but also a non-existing issue. That is, in a more technical description, all the evils [basically] arise from the interferences and conflicts between existents, not from the aspects pertaining

to Being but on account of the deficiency of their ambience and the narrowness of their abode. And these derive from limitations and deficiencies which are totally outside the ambit of the light of creation and are in reality below making [*ja'f*]. The true reality is the Light which is quit of all evil, defect and deficiency. However, these defects and evils and harmful and troublesome things, in respect of their defectiveness and harmfulness, are not essential objects of creation, but they are accidental objects of creation.[244]

The idea that evil is a non-existing affair is among the ancient ideas of philosophy, the exact comprehension of which necessitates an extensive technical preliminary preparation propounding which is not possible in this concise volume. But the core of the issue is that evil is not an exact, existing and specified reality which can be identified. Evil is a relative issue; it means that in relation to us it is considered evil. Evil is dependent on our judgment and since our judgment is interwoven with our variable interests, evil is variable as well and not fixed. Take a look at this earthly world. Perfection requires abandonment of the present condition and acceptance of some failures and frustrations which themselves bring about suffering and evil. As a result, evil is inevitable in the corporeal world. Yet, this evil is relative, not absolute and a requisite for perfection:

این جهان جنگ است چون کل بنگری ذره با ذره، چو دین با کافری

آن یکی ذره همی پرد به چپ و آن دگر سو یمین اندر طلب

...ذره ای بالا و آن دیگر نگون جنگِ فعلیشان ببین اندر رُکون

جنگِ طبیعی، جنگِ فعلی، جنگِ قول در میان جزوها، حربی است هول

این جهان زین جنگِ قایم می بُود در عناصر در نگر تا حل شود

*When you consider, this world is all at strife,
Mote with mote, as religion (is in conflict) with infidelity.
One mote is flying to the left,
And another to the right in search.
One mote (flies) up and another down:
In their inclination (movement) behold actual strife.
The actual strife is the result of the hidden strife:
Know that that discord springs from this discord.*

This world is maintained by means of this war:

Consider the elements, in order that it (the difficulty) may be solved.[245]

Evil as constructive

The foregoing discussion was more a philosophical outlook on the place of evil in the system of the universe where we tried to illuminate the point that basically evil is relative and subjective, not a reality independent from man's perception. But here the discussion is on its function.

The question is: What is the benefit of evil—be it relative or exact and absolute reality—for man? The thrust of the famous Book of Job is this one. Why a pious and upright man such as Job ('a) should be afflicted with all these adversities and undergo diverse miseries and agonies?

Many have attempted to answer this question. Yet, most of these answers embody one point and that is the constructive role of evil for man. Many of the mystics [*ṭrifṭn*] and teachers of ethics emphasize this principle that the presence of some of the evils is needed for the nourishment of man's soul and formation of his personality. Man grows and attains perfection only in a conducive environment and with the provision of necessary conditions.

But this favourable environment does not only mean comfort, convenience and unconsciousness; it also means the existence of some unpleasantness and tribulations. A driver who drives along a highway having no acclivity or declivity will easily feel sleepy and it is even possible for him to be exposed to the danger at an accident. However, the one who is driving along an extremely winding highway, and every moment, considers the probability of an unexpected occurrence, is always careful and does not allow himself to fall sleep.

Thus, the philosophy behind some evils is to keep man always alert and ready to overcome all odds. One of the contemporary Christian preachers names this theory as the divine justice theory of soul nourishment since this theory is indicative of the great scheme of God of assisting human beings in attaining moral and spiritual maturity. According to this theory, to live in a particular environment is necessary for nourishment of the soul. An environment can cause the moral and spiritual maturity of man in which real challenges are real opportunities for the emergence of moral virtues, and real facilities for the appearance of faith in God should be present.[246]

For instance, in the training courses for soldiers, training programs are designed to be rigid and severe so as to put the maximum physical and emotional pressure on them. The aim of such programs is not to annoy or torment others. Rather, it is meant to prepare individuals to confront actual situations and serious challenges. Well, if we encounter such cases which are termed evils, our outlook on them in

general will be changed. The goal of a coach who encourages the athletes under his supervision to undergo difficult and rigid practice is the enhancement of their physical ability. The purpose of a professor who gives complicated assignments to his students is to increase their knowledge. The problem that nature poses for us is with the same aim of augmenting our ability.

The same is the view of the Imām on the issue of evil. He devotes one of the *hadīths* in his forty selected *hadīths* on this matter. After narrating a *hadīth* with this purport, he embarks on its exposition: Imām as-S̄adiq (‘a) narrates from the Book of Imām ‘Alī (‘a) in which he says:

Of all mankind the prophets undergo the severest of trials, and after them the *awsiyā’* [executors of will], and after them the elect to the extent of their nobility. Indeed, the believer undergoes trial in proportion to his good deeds. So, one whose faith is sound and whose deeds are good, his trials are also more severe. That is indeed because God Almighty did not make this world a place for rewarding the believer and punishing the unbeliever. And one, whose faith is feeble and whose (good) deeds are few, faces fewer tribulations. Verily, tribulations hasten toward the believer with greater speed than rainwater toward the earth’s depths.[247]

We should not forget that in Islamic belief, this world is the place for trial. Trial takes place not only through difficulties and tribulations but also through happiness and joys. In the Glorious Qur’an the word, *bā’/ā’* [calamity and affliction] and its derivatives are used in the sense of testing through happiness as well as testing through suffering and tribulation.

Sometimes, in a bid to distinguish the two forms of *bā’/ā’*, terms such as ‘good’ and ‘evil’ are used. For example, in this noble *āyah* we read: “And We try you with evil and with good, for ordeal.”[248] Likewise, the terms *hasanāt* [good things] and *sayyi’āt* [bad things] are used. For instance, in this *āyah* it is stated: “And We have tried them with good things and evil things that haply they might return.”[249] Hence, the description of *bā’/ā’* in the language of the Qur’an is far more general and broader than its prevalent meaning in the Persian language.[250] As a result, some of the trials take place in the form of evil and prepare to face real situations. In this sense, evil is not only not bad, but also prepares the ground for the growth and cognition of man. Thus, they have said:

فضل و بزرگی و سالاری

اندر بالای سخت پدید آید

From severe affliction will come out

Virtue, greatness and merit

Such evils are broad in scope—extending from a simple fever to the death of spouse or child. A simple ailment such as fever not only activates the entire immune system of the body but also warns us to prepare ourselves to face it, and to make ourselves prepared for the eradication of the purulence from

our body.

Hence, this evil is needed for our existence and survival. If we carefully analyze all afflictions and tribulations, we will realize this feature of them. Even the severest bodily pains also have this function, and if one day the alarm system of the body is removed for whatever reason, then calamity, tragedy and mishap will commence. In this context Dr. Paul Brandt embarked on a detailed study and shed light on the vital role of pain.

The outcome of the research has been published in the book entitled, *Pain: The Gift that Nobody Accepts*. After studying patients afflicted with leprosy, who gradually gave up their body members, he arrived at the conclusion that the disease itself does not cause the death of the body tissues. Rather, it is the effect of malfunctioning of the sense [of touch] that the leper ceases to protect his senses and [unconsciously] commits acts harmful to himself. According to Dr. Brandt such patients “are lacking a system that gives alert to the damages done to the tissue.”[251]

The consequence of the lack of system (sense) of pain is that sometimes, such patients run and walk with their skins full of wounds—even open ones—to the extent that the bones are also visible, thus causing constantly increasing deterioration of the tissues ... In some cases, those afflicted with leprosy put their hands on fire, for example to pick something there but do not feel any pain.[252]

Thus, apart from being not bad, pain is rather considered an agent protecting our body and it is the same unpleasant sense that guarantees our life, and in general, compels the human organism to react. This view is also true for other ‘evils’. For example, suppose we fail in the university entrance examination; in this case this ‘evil’ is, in fact, a warning to us that shows us as not being intelligent enough and urges us to strive more. It is the same analysis that explains why all the prophets (‘a) have suffered.

One who wants to lead a nation or community [*ummah*] should have such an extraordinary capacity, that no amount of difficulty could shake his will. God makes His chosen prophets (‘a) suffer, He tests and trains them, causes them to develop, and so prepares them to shoulder the responsibilities of prophethood. As such, suffering cannot be a useless and worthless affair. Instead, the blessings therein should be seen with clear vision and it should be comprehended that in this world “each of its pains and hardships carries within itself some goodness and bounty.”[253]

Apart from this fundamental function of suffering and evil, there are many other functions and utilities some of which have been pointed out by Imam Khomein[ؑ]. One of the functions of suffering is that it makes man attentive to, and concerned with, the hereafter and makes him understand that this world is not his everlasting abode:

Thus, if a man faces adversities, pain and torments in this world and is overtaken therein by waves of calamities and tribulations, he will inevitably come to resent it. His attachment to it will diminish and he

will come to distrust it. If he believed in another world, a vast world free of every kind of pain and grief, he will inevitably want to migrate to it, and if he were unable to make the journey physically, he will send his heart out to it.[254]

Hence, most of the tribulations and afflictions are a sign for the believers and a notice about their unpleasant condition and also a reminder of the goal that they should have. Apart from this, some of the tribulations and afflictions make man remember the Fountainhead of the universe and make him harmonious with the remembrance of the Sole Creator:

And another point relating to the severity of the tribulations of the elect among God's servants is that they are made to remember God on account of these adversities and tribulations and to pray and lament in front of His Sacred Essence. This makes them accustomed to remember Him and keep their thoughts busy with Him.[255]

Moreover, some of spiritual excellences and stations for man will be attained only through patiently tasting and experiencing tribulations and afflictions. Hence, the Imām indicates this point in this manner:

Another point related to the severity of the believer's tribulations that has been mentioned in traditions is that there are certain stations for the believers which they cannot attain without undergoing suffering, pain and affliction.[256]

Therefore, keeping in view the diverse functions and utilities of tribulation and suffering, it can be deduced that the more the blessings God bestows on His servant, the more is he afflicted with them and it is this conclusion that the Imām describes in this way:

Whenever God Almighty has a greater consideration and love for someone, and when someone is the object of the mercy of His Sacred Essence to a greater extent, He restrains him from this world and its charms with the waves of calamity and tribulation... And if there weren't any other reason except this one for endurance of severe calamities it would have been sufficient.[257]

At this juncture, two points must be stated. One is the issue of natural sufferings and the other, self-made ones.

Whatever has been stated about suffering and its station is related to natural sufferings and tribulations, which man experiences naturally. God Almighty views these tribulations as a kind of test, attributes them to Himself and points to Himself as the cause. That is why He says, "*We test them.*"

Nevertheless, some of the tribulations and sufferings exist as a result of the unscrupulous actions of we human beings and arise from our moral vices. If our social system is designed in such a way as to cause rivalry, and if such rivalry entails suffering, one cannot consider the social system to be constructive. If in the society wealth accumulation and the desire for more is such that it deprives all of tranquillity, it can no longer be considered an opportunity for rectification of the soul and attachment of spiritual

perfections. All of these are a result of love of this world, which in turn, is the source of all sins. Most of the sufferings and tribulations are a product of the wrong actions of man and arise from vices such as jealousy, selfishness, and pride.

These tribulations can never be ascribed to God; basically attributing them to God arises from man's irresponsibility. In relation to such tribulations, God Almighty disavows responsibility and holds them to be the result of man's action: *"Whatever of good befalleth thee (O man) it is from Allah, and whatever of ill befalleth thee it is from thyself."*[258] In essence, God is the Absolute Source of goodness and His Essence is all-blessing and all-good and from this Essence there is nothing but goodness. Hence, every evil is the consequence of man's erroneous actions and selfishness. Therefore, God considers the occurrence of corruption, tribulations and mischief as the product of human beings' conduct, and says: ***"Corruption doth appear on land and sea because of (the evil) which men's hands have done."***[259] So, the most important point is that we should distinguish natural sufferings from self-made ones.

The second point is that although suffering has a constructive role in the life of human beings, one cannot 'create' suffering by using this as an excuse, and use it for one's growth. It is true that tribulation is an element in man's growth. Yet, the ground for the occurrence of tribulation should not be prepared in advance. For instance, taking an examination and failing in it can be the ground for our growth. But it does not mean that we refrain from any form of preparation and only take the examination.

The outcome of taking various examinations without preparing for them is failure after failure. These failures cannot be considered as a prelude to success; they also pave the ground for further failures. That is why psychologists point to the destructive effects of such failures in this manner: "If a person repetitively experiences failure, he will reach a stage where he can no longer endure experiencing more failures and thus, behavioural derangements appear in him." [260]

The point is that in case some adversity occurs, we welcome it warmly and consider it as an opportunity for our growth; not that we chase after misery before it strikes us. As such, our various *hadiths* have discouraged us from hoping for tribulations and from laying the grounds for it. We have been taught to always pray to God for health and well-being, and to refrain from looking for trouble and tribulation. For example, it has been narrated from Imam ar-Ridwa [261] (‘a) that Prophet Joseph [Yusuf] (‘a) complained to God:

‘Why did I deserve to be imprisoned?’ God revealed to him: ‘It is you who chose it when you said: ‘O my Lord, the prison is dearer to me than that unto which they invite me.’ [262] Why did you not say, ‘Prosperity is dearer to me than that unto which they invite me?’ [263]

Therefore, the fundamental teaching of the Infallibles (‘a) in this context is that we should be always seeking welfare and prosperity. However, when we face tribulations, we should not be afraid, take it as a good omen and utilize it as an opportunity for our perfection.

The hereafter as the place for reward

If the prophets (‘a) and saints [awliya] faced abundant tribulations as was stated, the tribulations cannot be reckoned as compensation for one’s sins in this world. As was indicated in the aforecited *hadith*, God has assigned the world neither as the reward of the believer nor compensation for the disbeliever.

Hence, there is no connection between the sins of man and worldly tribulations. It is narrated in the Book of Job that [his] sympathizers persistently attempted to prove to Job (‘a) that his tribulations and sufferings were the result of his past sins. But he would strongly reject this notion, viewing no connection between the two, and deeming himself sinless. “Job (‘a) knew that the world is more complex than the simplified theory that [his] sympathizers portray.”[264]

This theory that misery is the consequence of man’s sins and punishment for his deeds, though very prevalent, has numerous shortcomings and is not compatible with the indisputable principles of religious belief. Though it is often said, “If you vex the people, circumstances will also vex you; circumstances makes no mistake in punishing the people,” this sort of understanding elicits abundant unanswerable questions, which is the subject of books on divine justice.

If we accept that the world is the testing place and that as long as man is alive he has the chance to look back on his past deeds, and at any moment, is able to turn away from the path he has taken, the issue of this world as the place for retribution for sins can no longer be put forward. Let us assume that a teacher wants to give an examination to his pupils and he gives 90 minutes for them to write their answers. Now, every student has the right to make use of the total 90 minutes.

It is even possible for one to give wrong answers to all the questions; but in the last minutes, once he realizes his mistakes, he could change them. If the teacher also found out that somebody has given wrong answers to all the questions, so long as his test paper has not been submitted, the teacher cannot deprive him of the chance of changing his answers and give him a grade then and there. It is the definite right of the students to make use of this chance in whatever way they like, and interference on the part of the teacher is counted as a violation of this right. Likewise, the world is exactly the place of examination of man.

The lifespan of everyone is the period in which one should come out of life’s examination with dignity and pride. Hence, throughout life everyone has this opportunity and right to give his answers to the questions of life. In the description of Imām Khomein, “This world, due to its defective, feeble and weak nature, is neither the abode of the reward of God Almighty nor the place of chastisement and punishment.”[265]

It is such since this world is the world of duty and not of reward. “This world is the abode of duty and the farm of the Hereafter. It is a place of trade and earning whereas the Hereafter is the abode of reward and punishment, of bounty and damnation.”[266]

In the language of the Master of the Pious [Imam ‘Alī] (‘a), “Today is the day of preparation (training the horses) while tomorrow is the day of race.”[267]

Divine justice necessitates that one can make use of all his opportunities and it is only after that is his account examined. Hence, neither can those that have met with misfortunes be regarded as sinful, nor the prosperous as sinless. In essence, the cause and effect relationship between these two is not in this world. In the same manner, it is not so that anyone who commits a sin will immediately suffer for it. Such an expectation is contrary to reality and repugnant to divine justice. Thus, those who expect that God Almighty would immediately get hold of one who commits some sin or indecency in this world or perpetrates some injustice or aggression against someone, and cut his hand off and expunge him from the realm of existence, are unaware that their expectation is contrary to this world’s order and opposed to God’s wont and *sunnah*.

Here is the place of trial and the zone of the separation of the wretched from the felicitous and the sinful from the obedient. Here is the realm of the manifestation of deeds, not the abode of the emergence of the results of personal deeds and qualities.[268]

Therefore, tribulation in this world is not retribution for the deeds of human beings, and no connection should be established between the two. Nonetheless, at times Divine Grace warrants that by motivating the sinner, he can be prevented from indulging in sins; and God does so. However, this matter has no link to retribution for sins. Let us assume that in the previous example, after the teacher found out that one of the students had given wrong answers to most of the questions, she passes snide remarks or looks at the student sternly, making him immediately realize and correct all his mistakes. In this case, the teacher has not punished him but actually done him a great favour.

Some of the punishments of God are like this and anyone subjected to them should be grateful to God for being kind to him. So, “If occasionally God Almighty troubles an oppressor, it may be said that it is because of the Almighty’s mercy for that oppressor (for it stops him from sinning further).”[269]

As such, from the viewpoint of Imam Khomeinī evil is a relative and non-existing phenomenon, not a real and exact affair. In addition to this, it is necessary for man’s perfection and an indication of God’s grace to His servant, and there is no connection between sinfulness and tribulation in this world. So, evil is also a disguised grace of God for His servants and is among the necessary grounds for man’s spiritual perfection. In his poetical lines Mawlānā likens the soul of believer to an animal named *ushghur*, a kind of porcupine, which becomes stronger and its resolve firmer with increasing tribulation and suffering:

هست حیوانی که نامش اشغُر است او به زخم چوب زفت و لَمْتُر است

تا که چوبش مزنی، به مشود او ز زخم چوب، فربه مشود

نفس مؤمن اشغری آمد یقین کو به زخم رنج زفت است و سمین

زین سبب بر انبیا رنج و شکست از همه خلق جهان افزون تر است

تا ز جانها جانشان شد زفت تر که ندیدند آن بلا قوم دگر

There is an animal whose name is ushghur (porcupine):

It is (made) stout and big by blows of the stick.[270]

The more you cudgel it, the more it thrives:

It grows fat on blows of the stick.

Assuredly the true believer's soul is porcupine,

For it is (made) stout and fat by the blows of tribulation.

For this reason the tribulation and abasement (laid) upon the prophets

Is greater than (that laid upon) all the (other) creatures in the world,

So that their souls became stouter than (all other) souls;

For no other class of people suffered that affliction.[271]

Thereafter, he likens man to an untanned hide that the tanners treat and make useful by the use of bitter and acrid agents. Then, he urges us to accept such sufferings which are meant for our own perfection:

پوست از دارو بلاکش مشود چون ادیم طایفی خوش مشود

ورنه تلخ و تیز مالیدی در او گنده گشتی، ناخوش و ناپاک بو

آدمی را پوست نامدبوغ دان از رطوبتها شده زشت و گران

تلخ و تیز و مالش بسیار ده تا شود پاک و لطیف و با فوره

ور نمی تانی، رضا ده ای عیار گر خدا رنجت دهد بناختیار

*The hide is afflicted by the medicine (tan-liquor),
 (But) it becomes sweet like Tā'if leather;
 And if he (the tanner) did not rub the bitter and acrid (liquor) into it,
 It would become fetid, unpleasant, and foul-smelling.
 Know that Man is an untanned hide,
 Made noisome and gross by humors.
 Give (him)[272] bitter and acrid (discipline) and much rubbing (tribulation),
 That he may become pure and lovely and exceedingly strong;
 But if you cannot (mortify yourself), be content, O cunning one,
 If God give you tribulation without choice (on your part).
 For affliction (sent) by the Friend is (the means of) your being purified:
 His knowledge is above your contrivance. [273]*

Suffering as commensurate to one's own understanding

The fact cannot be denied that the more our awareness of ourselves and the things around us increases, the more we discern the gloomy aspects of life. This matter pains us. In a research study on prosperity, which a number of American and European universities had conducted, the conclusion was reached that there is a direct relationship between suffering and awareness, and if man's awareness exceeds a specific level, it can even prevent his happiness in life. Mawlānā describes this truth in this fashion:

*The more wakeful anyone is, the more full of suffering he is;
 The more aware (of God) he is, the paler he is in countenance.[274]*

But, this suffering does not belong to the daily suffering and that which, at times, ensues from foolishness making man's soul dejected and sad. This suffering neither arises from moral vices nor selfishness and pride. Some of the sufferings are files of the soul and obstruct man's soul from soaring to greater heights—like the pain of having no material luxuries and means of comfort; like the pain experienced when our neighbor or friend is financially well-off while we are not. Such sufferings and the illusion arising there from trample on the soul of man:

جان همه روز از لگدکوب خیال وز زیان و سود و از خوف زوال

نی صفا می ماندش نی لطف و فر نی به سوی آسمان راه سفر

*All day long, from the buffets of phantasy
And from (thoughts of) loss and gain and from fear of decline,
There remains to it (the soul)
Neither joy nor grace and glory nor way of journeying to Heaven.* [275]

No, such pains have no relation to man's intellect and discernment; in fact, it is a sign of a lack of intelligence. However, there are sufferings born of sagacity and an indication of man's wisdom. If we search through the whole of history we will realize this truth and see that the sages and people's leaders always used to suffer. Their suffering was expressive of their extraordinary innate capacity.

They possessed such a greatness of soul that they held the suffering of all as their own and were concerned not only with their own affairs. In a speech, Imam 'Alī ('a) refers to the attack of Mu'āwiyah's army, [276] and says: "They used to attack the women of the *Ahl adh-Dhimmah* [277] and confiscate their ornaments, and these women had nothing to do but to plead for mercy." Then he ('a) reckoned this tragedy to be so serious that if a person dies on hearing this news, it is not only regarded by him ('a) as natural but even praiseworthy. "If any Muslim dies of grief after all this he is not to be blamed but rather there is justification for him before me." [278] Yes, such suffering is an indication of man's lofty soul. Thus, John Stuart Mill, [279] a philosopher who was a proponent of the ethical school of utilitarianism [280] and, at times, whose ideas were poorly interpreted, unambiguously posits that human sufferings are superior to animal joys, and says: "To be an unhappy human being is better than to be a cheerful pig. It is better for me to be a despondent Socrates than a joyful stupid." [281]

Sometimes, the Most Noble Messenger (s) would also suffer because of the condition of his *ummah* [community] and would strive for its welfare so much so that he would be on the verge of danger. His noble soul could not accept that those people live in ignorance and corruption. Owing to this, he was acting beyond his duty. So, God Almighty discouraged him from exerting excessive pressure on himself, and said: "***We have not revealed unto thee (Muhammad) this Qur'an that thou shouldst be distressed.***" [282]

Likewise, He dissuaded him from arduous effort for the salvation of disbelievers, and said: "***So let not thy soul expire in sighings for them.***" [283]

Then, God also thus describes His Most Noble Messenger (s) and while addressing the people He says: "***There hath come unto you a messenger, (one) of yourselves, unto whom aught that ye are overburdened is grievous.***" [284]

In spite of all these, he (s) had suffered so much that he said: “No prophet was persecuted as I was.”[285] This suffering is rooted in man’s altruism and endeavor for the deliverance of others, and it is only in name that it has commonality with self-made and superficial sufferings. Hence, it has been emphasized in the noble *hadīth* that whoever is narrow-minded and of poor intellect, his hardship and suffering then will also be less. It is due to the fact that such a person only suffers with regard to water, bread and shelter and if these three are provided, it will make no difference for him what the fate of others may be and will view himself as an isolated and solitary island.

Therefore, suffering is a symbol of altruism and a profound sense of humaneness, having direct relationship with the intellect and wisdom. Imām Khomein[ؑ] analyzes this kind of suffering in this manner:

The persons of weak intellects and feeble sensibility are secure from spiritual tribulations and intellectual suffering in proportion to their intellectual weakness and the feebleness of their sensibility. On the contrary, those with more complete intellects and acuter sensibility have to undergo spiritual tribulations more intensely in proportion to the perfectness and acuteness of their intellect and sensibility... for whoever perceives the greatness and glory of the Lord to a greater extent and knows the sacred station of God Almighty more than others, he suffers more and is tormented to a greater extent by the sins of the creatures and their offences against the Lord’s sanctity. Also, one who has a greater love and compassion for the creatures of God is tormented to a greater extent by their crooked and wretched condition and ways.[286]

It should not remain unsaid that this type of suffering does not mean grief and sorrow. Man is aware of the truths of the universe to such an extent that he views God as Beautiful and His creations as manifestations of beauty and splendor.

He regards this system as excellent and believes, “Every thing is good in its own place.” As such, everything is joy, happiness and rejoicing. On the other hand, since other human beings have not recognized their reality, take no step in the matter, and search for the way from the misled ones on the verge of ‘drowning’, they suffer and become sorrow-stricken. Hence, on the one hand there is joy and happiness, and grief and sorrow on the other. These two levels should not be erroneously interchanged. Owing to this, it is stated in the *hadīths* that the believer always has a smile on his face, and hides his sorrow beneath his bosom.[287]

Therefore, what is meant by sagacious suffering is profound discernment of the tragic condition of some people, and not personal despondence and daily sorrows.[288]

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