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Chapter 18: God, and the Solution of Evil

In the previous chapter we discussed the problem of evil as the most fundamental and ultimate problem that has been challenging the philosophers specially the theists.

In summery, failure to solve the paradox of God and the problem of evil and lead some to 1) believing in non-existence of God, or 2) believing in dualism, or 3) limiting God's attributes.

In principle, we believe there is only one God who is the creator of all, who is infinite and hence Omnipotent, Omniscient and Benevolent or most Merciful.

The above statement will be understood only when the reality of evil is comprehended.

Evil is nonbeing

This answer was the doctrine of the Roman philosopher Plotinus (AD 205–270) and finds adherents among Christian philosophers from Scholastics to several modern philosophers of note, Leibniz, for example.

The main stream Muslim philosophers from Farabi (c.873–950) and Avicenna (980–1037) to Molla Sadra have also adopted this doctrine to denote the concept of dualism.

This answer suggests that the analysis of evil shows that there are chiefly two types of evil. One which is nonbeing, and the other one which although is being but because they lead to nonbeing are regarded evil. Thus, evil tends to make that which ceases to be.

This obviously does not mean that what which is known to us as evil does not exist. No doubt, blindness, earthquake, disease and the like do exist.

All what we know as evil are either in fact lack of something or the cause of lack of something, or else they are not evil. Let me explain this a little bit further.

When we say something is bad or evil, what we really mean is that the thing in question lack something,

is somehow incomplete. But to say that something is lacking in some respect is not to assign any positive or real quality to it.

Ignorance' is lack of knowledge, poverty' is lack of wealth and death' is lack of life. Evil, then, considered in itself, is mere nonbeing, the deprivation of reality, whereas being and perfection are synonymous. Insofar as anything is real, it is perfect and good.

Similarly, if certain bacteria or earthquake or cyclone is bad, is primarily because they cause death or lose in any way which falls into the first category of nonbeing. Imagine a volcano with no harm, a spider with no poisonous sting, an earthquake with no destructive effect, would they still be bad? Obviously not.

You may agree with me that even a volcano would appear a fantastic firework. Thus, when you are sitting safe and sound in your lounge room watching a movie on twister it is rather awesome.

This answer aims at denoting the false doctrine of dualism, which would regard two influencing factors for the events; God for the good events and Devil for the evil ones. According to this analysis of evil, there will be no question of who created evil'? For evil is directly or indirectly nonbeing and nonbeing does not need any creator.

Relatively Evil

All attributes related to objects are either real or relative. An attribute is real when an object enjoys it irrespective of any other factor. Life for instance is the real attribute of living organism. Insofar as there is an organism it enjoys the attribute of life irrespective of any other factor or object. One apple is one whether there is any other apple or not. Thus, life and number are the real attributes of the objects.

The relative attribute is when we compare two or more than two objects and conclude an attribute. An object is small or big, short or tall, heavy or light in comparison to others. For instance, if your brother is 22 tall and you are 33 you are taller than him.

But you are short if you compare your height with Michael Jordan who is 66! The amazing biggest ant is thousand of times smaller than the smallest elephant.

Under the shadow of the above explanation we can suggest that the second type of evil like earthquake and bacteria, which were the cause to nonbeing although they are not themselves nonbeings, but they are relatively bad. The fatal sting of a snake is bad for us, but it is defensive means of survival for itself.

Major pests such as Australian locusts when attacks human agriculture is evil and calamity for humans, and spreading of poison bait is evil and disaster for the pests. An erupting volcano and an earthquake that demand thousands of human life are considered by humans' natural disasters, but to a geologist or seismologist they are natural phenomena.

Without active volcanoes erupting and emitting gases, molten rocks and lavas there would be no life on earth. Earthquake can release energy thousands of times greater than the world's first atomic bomb. If this energy is not released, there will be no life on earth. In addition volcanoes produce landform and generously bring to surface all the hidden treasury of the earth.

Thus, nothing is evil for itself or else it wouldn't exist. The reality of every being is also its being for itself and its own purpose of life. As humans we call things evil when they are in conflict with our immediate interests.

This reminds us of what Voltaire says: *Evil signifies that which displeases us.*¹ We should, however, bear in mind that we are not the only creatures on earth nor the only one for whom this universe is created. As humans we are free in selection of the terms, but cannot imply our terminology to denote the existence of God or limit His attributes.

There will remain one question that couldn't God have arranged things so that no one ever suffered? Couldn't God made human beings immune to all disease? Couldn't God made the earth that no fatal earthquake or volcanoes needed?

There are several answers to these questions. If you read the rest of the article, you should be able to find satisfactory answers to them all.

Evil Disappears in the Gestalt Outlook

Gestalt is a school in psychology that deals mainly with the processes of perception. Gestalt is a physical, biological, psychological, or symbolic configuration or pattern of elements so unified as a whole that its properties cannot be derived from a simple summation of its parts. In Psychology it mainly deals with thinking, memory, and the nature of aesthetics.

One of the principles of cosmology is the correlation and harmony of all seemingly separate elements of the universe. The universe, therefore, should be observed as a Gestalt to see its correct image.

Philosophers from the ancient time to the present time by and large agree that the entire universe is a unified organism adding to it or omitting any part from it, disturbs the structure and the harmony of the universe.

Those who claim there could be a better world if God was really Benevolent and Omnipotent are suffering a very limited viewpoint and are not looking at the entire structure of the universe.

Let me help you with the aid of some analogies:

Remember da Vinci's Mona Lisa; one of the most celebrated portraits ever printed. Cut it into a jigsaw puzzle, and every piece, perhaps, will show nothing but a chaotic mixture of clashing colours.

But once all the pieces are fitted together, we see not only that the whole is beautiful but that each ugly piece makes its indispensable contribution to that beauty. May it not be the same with the universe?!

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

The universe is like eye, line, spot and eyebrow

That everything is beautiful in its due place

Another example is the simile of elephant in a dark room that Rumi mentions in his Mathnawi.

So, just as a work of art, which as a whole possesses high aesthetic value, contain elements that considered in themselves lack aesthetic value, or even possess disvalue, so also the universe, which as a whole is the best possible contain elements which considered in isolation evil. Thus, the world as it is– is the best possible world in which every element is as it could be.

Moses in response to Pharaoh when asked him to describe his Lord to him referring to this fact said:

Our Lord is He who gave to everything its creation and then guided. 20:50

The term 'its creation' means nothing in this universe could be any different then what it is. Everything is so perfect in the way it is, if looked collectively. Imam Ali (a.s) says: *Behold! This world would not be established unless in the way that God has made it with all its blessings and calamities and rewards in hereafter, or whatever He may wish that you do not know. Thus, should you any part of it confuse you, blame your ignorance*²

Mola Sadra has dedicated a chapter in his 'Asfar' under the heading *Chapter 7: What the general public consider evil in this world, is in the will of God for the benefit of creatures*.³ He then gives the example of death' as the most vivid example of evil and in a philosophical analysis suggests that death is not evil in any sense.

The story of Moses and the knowledgeable devotee of God' (Khedr) mentioned in chapter 18 of the Quran is the best example to express the limitation of human knowledge and the fact that as such he tends to assume things are evil, so far as he cannot with his very limited knowledge– see any good in them.

Therefore, things appear to us as evil because our viewpoint is limited; whereas God who sees the whole of things entire, sees that the whole is perfect and harmonious. Thus, what ever– due to partial look– seems evil is universally good.

There are certain things that if observed or considered individually seems evil as it may harm an individual, but when looked wholly is very useful and hence good. An earthquake may demand the life of some thousands of people, but save the entire life on earth.

Evil; a platform to Perfection

The purpose of life is considered one of the puzzles of life. I shall discuss the issue in a separate chapter in the future. In short, from the Islamic point of view, man is created to perfect themselves and to reach the nearness of the Most Perfect; the Almighty.

The purpose of life is not to enjoy a hedonistic lifestyle. Man is on a road towards God and his duty is to endeavour to that perfection.

From a religious perspective, this world is the ladder of elevation and perfection. Our perfection in many instances is in the light of difficulties. Moral attitudes and virtues such as generosity, patience, sacrifice; scientific discoveries and innovations are indebted to calamities, which are supposedly evil. Without disease there would be no medicine and medical discoveries.

Suppose that, contrary to fact, this world were a paradise from which all possibility of pain and suffering were excluded. The consequences would be very far-reaching.

For example, no one could ever injure anyone else; the murderer's knife would turn to paper or the bullets to thin air; the bank safe, robbed of a million dollars would miraculously become filled with another million dollars, human beings would be immune to all disease; men would be given flying wings, no unavoidable diminution of power in the aged, no birth deformation, no madness, no accidents, no natural disasters, playing child falling from a height would float unharmed to the ground; the reckless driver would never meet with disaster.

Then there would be no sciences, for there would be no enduring world structure to investigate.

In such a hedonistic world generosity, kindness, courage, compassion and charity and in short no moral and ethical values and virtues would exist anymore and hence it might well be the worst of all possible worlds. Thus, what we name as evil is in fact contributing to the world's perfection in such a way that without it, the world would not be the best possible.

Human history is rich with the examples of many people with disability whose achievements are far higher than many supposedly healthy ones.

Jim Abbot won Olympic gold in 1988 and been a Letterman. He is the only player in major league baseball who was born with one hand. (He didn't have right hand)

Prof. Stephen Hawking the most eminent physicist and astrophysicist of our time. His book 'A brief

history of time¹ was the best seller for months. When he was 21 he was diagnosed with ALS. This disease affects walking, speaking, swallowing and even breathing.

Today he is confined to a wheelchair, cannot move much at all, has trouble holding his head up and cannot speak. Yet, disagree to be name disabled. He believes he was put in a challenge and has learned how to learn the challenge.

Beethoven, who is generally considered one of the greatest composers in the Western tradition, was deaf and could not hear his own symphony.

Thus, many apparent evils are in reality blessings.

And it may be that you dislike a thing which is good for you and that you may like a thing which is bad for you. Allah knows but you do not know. [2:216]

According to the Quran the ease and success are gained though difficulties.

Verily, along with every hardship is relief [94:5]

I suppose the best expression of (seemingly) evil which gives birth to good, and (seemingly good) which gives birth to evil is expressed by the Prophet of Islam (saww): *There is no evil which results in Paradise, and there is no good that which brings about hell.* 4

Evil in the Quran

The term evil– for displeasing events and losses– is used in the Quran more than 30 times.

Evil as well as good is sometimes serving the purpose of a trial for the sake of perfection.

And We shall make a trial of you with evil and with good and to Us you will be returned. [21:35]

This trial is explained further in chapter 17:

And when We bestow Our Grace on man, he turns away and becomes arrogant. And when evil touches him, he is in great despair. [17:83]

Evil is also regarded in the Quran a punishment of sinful acts. Many nations according to the Quran have been destroyed by natural disasters due to their impious acts.

So We took retribution from them. We drowned them in the sea, because they belied Our Signs and were heedless about them. [7:136]

This, of course, does not imply that all who drown are receiving their punishment. The Prophet of Islam (saww) once asked his companion about the meaning of martyrdom. They said that it is he who is killed

in the warfare. The Prophet said: Then, who few the martyrs would be. He then counted those who innocently drown, or died when a building collapsed on them as martyr.

According to Imam Sadiq (a.s) the compensation that a blind or deaf if practices patience- receive in hereafter is so abundant: *Then there is so much reward for those who became the victim of some calamities after their death- if they had been patient- that had after their death they been given the opportunity to return to this world to experience those calamities, they would have chosen to return to gain more reward.*⁵

It is also quoted from Imam Sadiq (a.s) for the reward of fever: *Indeed, when a believer is affected by fever, his/her sins drop like the leaves of a tree. Then if he/she moans in bed, his/her moaning is glorification of God and his/her cry unification of God and his/her turnover in bed gains him/her the reward of the one who fights with sword for the sake of God.*

Points to be added:

- 1) Are they natural disasters or natural phenomena?
- 2) If they are natural phenomena then they do not contradict the proof of order.

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1. Candide, ch. 30
 2. Nahjul-Balaghah, Sermon 31
 3. Al-Asfarul-Arba'eh, vol. 7, p.61
 4. Al-Tawhid, p.74
 5. Remember the story of Abu-Baseer.

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