

Evils, An Excerpt from Ayatullah Murtadha Mutahhari's Divine Justice

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Three Aspects of the Discussion

What we have discussed so far has been about disparities and discriminations. As we mentioned previously, the objections and problems related to "Divine Justice" are of several types: discriminations, annihilations and non-existences, faults and defects, and afflictions.

Earlier we promised that out of these four types of objections, we would discuss the first under the heading "Discriminations" and the remaining three under the heading "Evils." Now that we have completed the discussion about discriminations, we will begin the discussion of evils.

The answer that philosophers have given to the issue of evils includes three parts:

What is the essence of evils? Are evils real, existential things, or are they non-existential ('adami) and relative?

Whether evils be existential or non-existential, are good and evil separable or inseparable? In the second case—that they are inseparable—is the entirety of the universe, with all its goodnesses and evils, good or bad? That is, do goodnesses predominate over evils, or do the evils of the world predominate over its goodnesses? Or does neither predominate over the other, with them being equal.

Whether evils be existential or non-existential, and whether they be separable from goodnesses or not, is that which is evil actually evil, without there being any aspect of goodness in it; that is, without it being a preliminary or basis for one or several goodnesses? Or is there one or rather several goodnesses hidden in every evil, every evil producing one or several goodnesses?

In the first part, an answer will be given to the dualists, who maintain two types or sources of existence. And with the addition of the second part, an answer will be given to the objection of the materialists, who consider evils to be an objection to Divine wisdom, and also the objection of those who, by mentioning the problem of evil, find fault with Divine justice. The third part of the discussion reveals the beautiful and unique order of the world of existence, and it can be considered an independent answer—albeit sufficient—or a useful complement to the first answer.

Our Method

Using the same material that Islamic philosophers have mentioned in this discussion, we have engaged in answering the problem of evils in a new fashion. The answer we present in this book contains the same elements that are mentioned in books of Islamic philosophy—especially the books of Mulla Sadra—and both answers are essentially the same. The difference between our answer and theirs is in the particular method we have followed, and this is because we are studying the issue of evils from the perspective of “Divine Justice,” while the custom of Islamic philosophers was to cover it in the discussion of Divine Unity while refuting the objection of the dualists, or in the issue of “Divine providence and knowledge” and how Divine decree (qāḍī) relates to evils. And since they have studied it from that particular perspective, their answer pertains directly to refuting the question of the “duality of origin” or the manner of relation of Divine decree (qāḍī) to evils, and can only be used indirectly in the discussion of “Divine Justice.”

The Issue of the Duality of Existence

The basis of the objection of the dualists and their supporters—as have also indicated previously—is that if existing things in their essence are of two types—good and evil—they must necessarily originate from two types of sources, so that both goodnesses and evils relate to a separate creator. In reality, the dualists wished to exonerate God of evil, and ended up charging Him with having an associate. In the view of the dualists, who have divided the world into two divisions, good and evil, and consider the existence of evils to be extraneous, or rather detrimental, and naturally consider them to be from not God but rather a power in opposition to God, God is like a well-intentioned but weak human being who

is tormented by existing conditions and is not pleased with them, but is faced with a wicked and ill-intentioned rival who, in opposition to His desire, creates evils and vices.

The dualists have been unable to harmonize belief in the unlimited power and unchallenged will of God and His uncontested decree with belief in His Wisdom, Justice, and Goodness. But Islam, at the same time as it considers God to be the origin of all existence and possessor of unending mercy and supreme wisdom, it doesn't find fault with His supreme will and uncontested power; it relates everything to Him, even Satan and his leading astray.

In Islam's view, the issue of evils is solved in a different way, which is that Islam says that while in one reckoning the affairs of the world are divided into the two categories of good and evil, in another reckoning, there is no evil in the order of creation; what exists is good, and the existing order is the best order. Nothing more beautiful than what exists is possible.

Intellectually, such an answer to the issue of evils relies on a particular philosophy in which the issues of existence and non-existence are studied in depth. The answer this philosophy gives to the dualists is that "evils" are not real and actual existent things for them to have need of a creator and an origin. This point can be elucidated in two ways: that evil is non-existential, and that evil is relative. By explaining this point, the objection of the duality of existence is eliminated in its entirety.

Evil is Non-existential

A simple analysis shows that the essence of "evils" is non-existence. That is, all evils are of the form of non-existence and non-being. This point has a long precedent. The roots of this idea go back to ancient Greece. In books of philosophy, this idea is attributed to the ancient Greeks and specifically to Plato. But later philosophers have analyzed it better and to a greater extent; and since we consider this point to be correct and fundamental, we mention it here to the extent appropriate to this book. As an introduction, while asking our readers' pardon on account of the difficulty of the material, we request them to persevere and try to understand the intent. We think the matter is important enough to be given attention, and of course we will try to explain the matter as simply as possible.

The intent of those who say "Evil is non-existential" is not that that which is known as "evil" does not exist, for it to be said that this is obviously false; we see clearly and with our senses that blindness, deafness, sickness, oppression, injustice, ignorance, inability, death, earthquakes, and so on exist. Neither can we deny the existence of these things, nor their being evil. And [their intent] is also not that since evil is non-existential, therefore evil does not exist; and since evil does not exist, human beings have no obligation, since the obligation of man is to combat evils and evil people and acquire virtues and support good people. And since every condition is good and not evil, one must always be satisfied with the current situation, and must rather consider it the best possible condition.

Don't be quick to judge; neither do we want to deny the existence of blindness, deafness, injustice,

poverty, sickness, and so on; nor do we wish to deny their evilness; nor do we wish to deny the obligation of human beings and ignore the role of man in changing the world and perfecting society. The overall ascent of the world—and especially humanity—and the mission of humanity in managing that which has been placed on its shoulders is a part of the beautiful order of the world. So it is not these things that we are talking about; what we are talking about is that all of these are forms of “non-existential things” and “imperfections,” and their existence is of the form of the existence of “deficiencies” and “vacuums,” and they are evil because they are themselves non-being, deficiency, and emptiness, or are the source of non-

being, deficiency, and emptiness; the role of humanity in the necessary ascending order of the world is to compensate for deficiencies, fill up the vacuums, and eliminate the sources of these vacuums and deficiencies.

If this analysis is accepted, it is the first step and the first level; its effect is that it drives from one's mind the question, who created evils? Why are some beings good and some evil? It makes clear that that which is evil is not of the form of being, but of the form of emptiness and non-being, and it eliminates the background for dualist thought, which claims that existence has two branches, or rather two sources.

As for the aspect of Divine justice and infinite Divine wisdom, there are still other levels which we have to pass after this one.

Good and evil things in the world are not two separate and differentiated types from one another in the sense that, for example, inanimate objects or minerals are separate from plants and plants are separate from animals and create particular groups. It is a mistake to assume that evil things are a specific group of things whose essence consists of evil and in which there is no good; and good things in their turn are another category separate and differentiated from bad things. Good and evil are mixed together; they are inseparable. In nature, where there is evil there is also good, and where there is good there is also evil. In nature, good and evil are bound and mixed together in such a way that it is as if they have been compounded together, not a chemical compound, but a deeper and more subtle compounding, of the type of the compounding of being and non-being.

Being and non-being do not comprise two separate groups in the external world. Non-being is nothing and emptiness and cannot occupy a particular place side by side with being. But in the natural world, which is the world of potentiality and actuality, movement and evolution, and contradiction and opposition, wherever there are forms of being, forms of non-being also apply. When we speak of “blindness” we should not think that “blindness” is a specific thing and a tangible reality that exists in the eye of a blind person. Instead, “blindness” is nothing but the lack of “sight” and it itself has no reality.

Good and evil, too, are like being and non-being; in fact, fundamentally good is the same as being and evil is the same as non-being. Wherever we speak of evil, there is definitely a non-being and lack [of something] involved. “Evil” is either itself of the form of non-being, or it is a being that necessitates a

form of non-being; that is, it is a being that, inasmuch as it is itself, is good, and it is evil inasmuch as it necessitates a non-being; and it is only evil because it necessitates a non-being, not for any other reason. We consider ignorance, poverty, and death to be evil. These by their essence are non-being. We consider poisonous and dangerous animals, bacteria, and afflictions to be evil. These are not non-being by their essence, but they are beings that necessitate non-being.

“Ignorance” is the lack and non-existence of knowledge. Knowledge is a reality and an actual perfection, but ignorance is not a reality. When we say, “An ignorant person lacks knowledge,” it doesn't mean that he possesses a particular quality called “lack of knowledge,” and knowledgeable people don't possess that quality. Knowledgeable people, before they acquire knowledge, are ignorant; when they acquire knowledge, they don't lose anything; they only acquire something. If ignorance were an actual reality, acquiring knowledge—since it would be alongside a loss of ignorance—would simply be the changing of one attribute for another, just as a body loses one form and quality and acquires a different form and quality.

“Poverty” too is non-possession, not possession and being. One who is poor lacks something called wealth; it is not the case that he in turn possesses something called poverty and, like a wealthy person, has a type of possession, except that a wealthy person possesses wealth and a poor person possesses poverty.

“Death” too is the loss of something, not the acquiring of something. This is why a body that loses the attribute of life and turns into an inanimate object has descended, not ascended.

As for poisonous and dangerous animals, bacteria, floods, earthquakes, and afflictions, they are evil because they cause death or the loss of an organ or ability, or prevent abilities from reaching perfection. If poisonous animals did not cause death and sickness, they would not be evil; if plant afflictions did not cause the annihilation of trees or their fruits, they would not be evil; if floods and earthquakes did not result in human and material losses they would not be evil.

Evil is in those casualties and losses. If we call a beast of prey evil, it is not because its peculiar essence is the essence of evil, but because it is a cause of death and loss for something else. In reality, what is evil by essence is that loss of life itself. If a beast of prey were to exist but not to prey [on other things], that is, if it were not to cause loss of life for anything, it would not be evil, and if it exists and loss of life takes place, it is evil.

In terms of the relation between cause and effect, usually those very actual deficiencies, meaning poverty and ignorance, become causes of things like bacteria, floods, earthquakes, war, and so on, which are evils of the second type, meaning that they are beings that are evil inasmuch as they are a source of deficiencies and non-being.

In order to combat these type of evils, we must first combat the first type of evils and fill vacuums like ignorance, inability, and poverty, so that evils of the second type don't come about.

The same applies with regard to moral actions and ugly qualities. Injustice is bad because it destroys the “right” of the oppressed. A “right” is something which a being deserves and which one must receive. For example, knowledge is a perfection for a human being which the innate human capacity demands and moves toward, and, for this reason, deserves. If someone is denied the right to learn and is prevented from gaining knowledge, that is oppression and evil, since it prevents a perfection and causes a deficiency. Similarly, oppression is evil for the oppressor as well since it contradicts his higher potentials; if the oppressor possessed no higher power and potential than that of anger, oppression would not be bad for him, or rather it wouldn't have any meaning with respect to him.

Now that it has been established that evils are all of the form of non-being, the answer to dualists becomes clear. The objection of the dualists was that since there are two types of beings in the universe, the universe must necessarily have two types of origins and creators.

The answer is that there is no more than one type of being in the universe, and that is the existence of good things; evils are all of the form of non-being, and non-being is not a created thing. Non-being is from a “not creating,” not from a “creating.” One cannot say that the universe has two creators: one is the creator of beings and the other is the creator of non-beings. The example of being and non-being is like that of the sun and shadow. When a pole is put up in the sun, the area that remains dark because of the pole and doesn't become lighted by sunlight is called a “shadow.” What is a shadow? A “shadow” is darkness, and darkness is nothing but the non-being of light. When we say that light emanates from the originating centre, one cannot ask where the shadow has emanated from and what the centre of darkness is. Shadow and darkness have not emanated from anything and have no independent source and centre of their own.

This is the meaning of the words of the philosophers when they say that “evils” are not created in themselves, but are created subordinately and figuratively.

Evil is relative

Attributes by which things are described are of two types: real and relative. If an attribute applies to a certain thing in all conditions and irrespective of everything else, it is called a “real” attribute. A real attribute is one for which it is sufficient to posit a thing and that attribute in order for it to be possible for that thing to be described by that attribute. In contrast, a relative attribute is one in which supposing [the existence of] a thing and an attribute is not sufficient in order for that thing to be described by that attribute, unless some third thing is supposed that can serve as a basis for comparison and relation. Thus, whenever the affirmation of an attribute with respect to a thing depends on the keeping in mind of some third thing and comparing this with that, such an attribute is called “relative.”

For example, life is a real matter. A being, irrespective of whether it is compared to something else, either possesses life or doesn't possess it. Similarly, whiteness and blackness (assuming that colours are actual things) are real attributes. A thing that is white is white without it having to be compared to

anything else, and a thing that is black is black in itself, and it doesn't need to be compared to something else for it to be black. And many other attributes are the same way, such as quantity and dimension.

But smallness and largeness are relative attributes. When we say that a body is small, we have to see in comparison to what thing or relative to what thing we call it small. Every thing can be both small and large; it depends what thing we make our base and standard [of comparison].

For example, we say that an apple or a pair is small, and another apple or pair is big. Here, the standard is the size of other apples and pairs; that is, the apple or pair in question is either smaller or larger in size compared to other apples and pairs that we are familiar with. We also call a particular watermelon small. This too is in comparison to other watermelons.

This same watermelon which we view and call very small is bigger than that big apple, but since we compare it to watermelons and not apples, we call it small.

Consider the size of a large ant which is so large that you put your finger to your lip in wonder and the size of a very small camel whose small size you wonder at. You will see that the small camel is many millions of times the size of that very large ant. How can “very small” be bigger than “very big”? Is this a contradiction? No, it is not a contradiction. That “very small” was very small for a camel, and is very small compared to the standard and mould the mind has created in accordance with its familiarity with camels; and that “very big” was very big for ants, and is very big compared to the standard and mould the mind has created in accordance with its familiarity with ants.

This is the meaning of our statement: “Largeness and smallness are relative concepts”; but quantity itself—meaning number and dimension—are real things, as was indicated. If we have a number of apples, for example one hundred, this “one-hundredness” is a real attribute, not a comparative one; the same is true of their size, for example if it is half a cubic meter.

Number and dimension are of the category of quantity, and smallness and bigness are of the category of relation. Being one, two, three, four, and so on are real things; but being first, second, third, fourth, and so on are relative things.

For a societal law to be good or bad depends on it keeping in view both the individual's interest and society's interest together, giving precedence to collective rights over individual rights, and ensuring individual rights to the extent possible. But to ensure all individual freedoms one hundred percent is impossible, and thus whether a law is good from this perspective—that of ensuring freedoms—is relative, since only some of them can be ensured. A good law is one that ensures the maximum number of freedoms possible, even though it may necessitate the denial of some freedoms. Thus the goodness of a law with respect to ensuring freedoms is relative to other supposable laws which are less able to protect and ensure freedoms than it is.

Here it is necessary to mention a point to prevent a misunderstanding, which is that, as was noted, the

intent of the statement “Evil is relative” is relative as opposed to being real; “It is relative” means it is comparative. Sometimes relativity is used in opposition to absoluteness; in this case it means that the actuality of a thing depends on a series of conditions; and absoluteness means freedom from a series of conditions. If we take relativity in this sense, all natural and material things, inasmuch as they are contingent and dependent on a series of limited temporal and spatial conditions and only possess their particular reality under those conditions, are relative.

Only nonmaterial beings have absolute being. Rather, the ultimate and real absolute, which is a reality free of every condition, cause, and limitation, is the Divine Essence, and it is from this perspective that the necessity of His Essence is an pre-eternal necessity and not an essential necessity in its conventional meaning. The point is that here, where our discussion is about the relativity of the evilness of beings from which essential evils—meaning non-beings—originate, the intent is relativity as opposed to reality and actuality, not relativity as opposed to absoluteness, in which sense many good things are also relative.

Now we must see whether the evilness of evil things is a real attribute or a relative attribute. Previously we said that evil things are of two types: evils that are themselves non-existential, and evils that are existential things but are evil because they become causes of a series of non-existential things.

Evils that are themselves non-existential, such as ignorance, inability, and poverty, are real (non-relative) attributes, though [they are] non-existential; as for evils that are existential but are evil because they are a source of non-existential things, such as floods, poisonous animals, beasts of prey, and sickness-causing bacteria, without doubt their evilness is relative. In such cases, what is evil is evil with respect to one or several specific things. Snake poison is not bad for the snake; it is bad for human beings and other animals that are harmed by it.

A wolf is bad for a sheep, but not for itself or for a plant [for example]; just as a sheep, with respect to a plant that it eats and destroys, is bad, but with respect to itself, human beings, or a wolf [for example], it is not bad.

Rumi says,

Snake-poison is life to the snake, (But) it is death in relation to man.

Hence there is no absolute evil in the world; Evil is relative¹, know this (truth) also.²

On the other hand, real existence—anything which is created and originated and has actual existence—exists for itself, not for other things. The existence of every thing for another thing or things is a suppositional and non-real existence and is not subject to being created and originated.

In other words, every thing possesses an innate existence and an extrinsic existence (i.e. an existence for some other existence), and more precisely, the existence of every thing has two aspects: “in-itself”

or innate, and “for–other” or extrinsic. Things, inasmuch as they exist for themselves, are real, and in this sense are not evil. Every thing is good for itself; if it is evil, it is evil for something else. Can it be said that a scorpion is evil for itself? A wolf is evil for itself? No, without doubt the being of a scorpion or wolf is good for itself, they are for themselves just as we are for ourselves.

Thus the evilness of a thing is not in its innate being; it is in its relational being. But without doubt that which is real and actual is the innate and essential existence of every thing; relative existences are and suppositional and conventional things, and since they are relative and suppositional, they are not real, meaning that they do not actually have a place in the order of existence or possess actual being for it to be debated why this existence— meaning relative existence—has been given to them. In other words, things have not come into being twice or been given two beings, one in–themselves and the other in–relation.

Suppose that you explain a point for some students. Then you repeat it once, and again for a third and fourth time. Each time, you explained the same point without adding or subtracting anything. That is, your explanation which came into being through you is the same in all four instances, but each of those instances has an attribute peculiar to itself. One is “first,” another “second,” another “third,” and the last is “fourth.” In each instance, did you do two things: one, explaining your point; and two, giving your explanation the attribute of “first,” “second,” “third,” or “fourth”?

Or are these attributes a series of relational attributes—that are at the same time suppositional and derivational—that come about through your repeated action, which took place in all four instances in the same form, and through a comparison of those four instances with one another? It is obvious that the second case is correct. These types of attributes, which are suppositional and derivational attributes, are at the same time necessary and inseparable corollaries of their objects, which are real and actual things.

Thus, such things cannot be discussed as independent things. The question cannot be asked in the form, “Why did the Creator and Originator create these relational and suppositional beings?” since in the first place, these beings are not real for their creation to be discussed, and in the second place these suppositional and derivational beings are corollaries of actual beings and cannot be discussed independently; and if they are discussed non–independently, it will be in the form of why actual beings were created of which these are the inseparable suppositional and derivational corollaries. And this is the issue that will be broached and answered in the next section.

Incidentally, let us also point out that what we said about firstness, secondness, and so on being suppositional and derivational things and not possessing actual being, and thus not being subject to creation, should not be confused with another issue, which is the issue of precedence, meaning that a person or other free and self–conscious agent choose one of two things or actions over the other and place it first. This is another issue, and we will discuss it later. Paying attention to the example above will clarify the matter.

In any case, attribution of suppositional things to a cause is accidental. This is why philosophers have said that evils are not created by essence; in their essence they are not effects or created. Their being effects or being created is accidental. As we said previously, it is precisely as if we were to say, “The sun is the cause of the existence of shadow.”

Of course, without the sun, there would be no shadow as well, but the causality of the sun with respect to shadow is different from its causality with respect to light. The sun actually and really emanates light, but it doesn't really create shadow.

Shadow is not a thing for it to be originated. Shadow comes about from the limitation of light; rather it is the limitation of light itself. With respect to evils, whether of the first or the second type, the same is the case. Evils are suppositional and non-existential. Blindness in a blind person is not an independent reality for it to be said that one source created the blind person and another source created his blindness. Blindness is non-being, and every evil is non-being. Non-being has no origin or creator.

Evils from the Aspect of the Principle of Justice

In this way, the objection of the dualists and the fallacious idea of the duality and dual origin of being is eliminated, since it was demonstrated that being is not of two types for there to be a need of two origins.

But as we indicated earlier, the issue of the non-existentiality of evils alone is not sufficient to solve the problem of “Divine Justice”; it is [only] the first level and step. The conclusion that can be reached from this discussion is only that being is not of two types: one type those beings that, inasmuch as they are existent, are good; and the other type those beings that, inasmuch as they are existent, are evil. Instead, being, inasmuch as it is being, is good; and non-being, inasmuch as it is non-being, is evil; beings can be evil inasmuch as they are coupled with non-beings or are the sources of non-beings. Thus, in being itself there is no overruling duality for the idea of two sources of being to take root. And [in turn] non-being, inasmuch as it is non-being, does not require a separate origin and source.

But in terms of Divine Justice, the problem of evil takes a different form. From this aspect, the issue isn't the duality of things; the issue is—whether things are of two types or not—why deficiency, lack, annihilation, and non-being have a place in the order of being to begin with. Why is one person blind, another deaf, and why does a third have a physical deformity? For blindness, deafness, and other defects to be non-existential is not enough to solve this problem, because the question remains as to why being hasn't taken the place of this non-being? Isn't this a form of holding back of Divine bounty and grace?

And isn't the holding back of Divine grace a form of injustice? In the world, vacuums and deficiencies exist which are themselves the sorrows of this world. Divine justice requires that these vacuums be filled. There is also a series of existential things that—as indicated previously—are born of non-beings like ignorance, inability, and poverty, and in their turn are causes of a series of deficiencies, annihilations,

and non-beings. Illnesses, storms, fires, and earthquakes are of this type. Divine justice demands that such things not exist so that their effects, which are deficiencies, also not exist.

When we look at the problem from this aspect, we have to look into two issues:

First, is it possible to separate these deficiencies and lacks from the affairs of this world, or not? That is, is this world possible without these deficiencies, or are they inseparable corollaries of this world, with their non-existence being equivalent to the non-existence of the world?

Second, are those things that are called deficiencies and lacks absolute evil with no good hidden in them, or they are not absolute evil, with many benefits and effects following from them, and without which the order of the world will be destroyed and good things won't be able to exist [as well].

These two points comprise the second and third part of our discussion regarding evils, which we indicated earlier. The second part has become clear in the course of the first part and will become clearer in what follows, and the third part requires greater discussion, and we will discuss it in depth in the next section.

1. In this verse, Rumi has confused two issues. One is that evil (meaning evil of the second type) is in the relational and comparative being of things, not in their real and in-itself being. That is, everything in itself is good for itself; if it is evil, it is evil for something else, just like snake poison is good for the snake and bad for other things. Here, it must be said that the evilness of snake poison is in its for-other being, not in its in-itself being.

The other issue is that something whose being is good with respect to all things is called "absolute good," like the being of the Necessarily Existent; and if something is postulated whose being is evil with respect to all other things, it would be called "absolute evil." Relative good and evil, as opposed to absolute, mean that something is good or evil with respect to some—not all—things, like most things in the world. What Rumi mentions in this verse is a combination of the two issues; the first verse mentions the first issue, and the second verse the second one.

2. Nicholson, vol. 4, p. 276, vr. 68 and 65.

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