An Anthropocentric Approach to Evil

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With the pandemic of COVID-19 unleashing the deadly effects of its virus that has claimed millions of casualties all over the globe, the question of evil and suffering cannot be more relevant today. Given the complexities of the pandemic, one should look at it from multiple standpoints, beginning with the science of the virus in question. So, questions such as "Where did the virus come from?," "How is it transmitted?," or "What can be done to stop its spread?" should be investigated and examined using our best scientific models and evidence, especially because conflicting messages from the media and officials across different countries and organizations and unfounded conspiracy theories on the origins of the virus have only served to increase the level of anxiety among people.[1] It is also important to make ourselves aware of the failed economic and government policies that could have curtailed the impact of the pandemic. For instance, Debora MacKenzie outlines the lessons we failed to learn from such previous outbreaks as SARS, H1N1, Zika, and Ebola. She details the arrival and spread of COVID-19, offering a critique of the steps that governments could have taken to prevent or at least prepare for it.[2]

The pandemic has also elicited a variety of "how to" responses from physicians, sociologists, and psychologists. The neurosurgeon and CNN medical reporter Sanjay Gupta argues that we need to prepare for a new era where pandemics will be more frequent, and possibly even more deadly. Offering practical tools to ready ourselves for the future, he addresses critical questions such as, "Can we eradicate the virus for good, and if not, how do we live with it?", and "Does it make sense to spend more on health insurance to deal with any long-term effects?"[3] Others like Nicholas Christakis and Steven Taylor discuss what it means to live in a time

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1 See Raul Rabadan, *Understanding Coronavirus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

2 Debora Mackenzie, *COVID-19: The Pandemic That Never Should Have Happened and How to Stop the Next One* (New York: Hachette, 2020), 1–36. One thing the Western scientific community failed to do at the outbreak of the pandemic was to engage more seriously with the findings of its non-Western counterpart. See the inquiry in Alexus McLeod, "Editor's Note: On Philosophy, a Pandemic, and Our International Future," *Philosophical Forum* 53, no. 1 (2022): 3–9.

3 Sanjay Gupta and Kristin Loberg, *World War C: Lessons from the COVID-19 Pandemic and How to Prepare for the Next One* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2021).

of pandemic. These authors shed light on the social and psychological factors that are important for understanding and managing issues associated with pandemics, including the spreading of excessive fear, stigmatization, and xenophobia which occur when people are threatened with infection.[4]

There is little doubt that much can be learned about the nature of COVID-19 from all these approaches and domains. However, it would be premature to think that they somehow exhaust all the possible inquiries regarding the pandemic, especially inquiries which pertain to the philosophical, ethical, and spiritual spheres. This is where *From the Divine to the Human* intervenes in the field of the global philosophy of religion by utilizing the rich and unique resources of the Islamic intellectual tradition as well as contemporary Muslim philosophers' creative engagements with these materials. Even though evil and the cause of human suffering is perhaps one of the most debated questions in philosophy of religion, the coronavirus pandemic forces us to look at this issue with renewed fervor, not least because it challenges us to rethink the role of a powerful and merciful God in the face of human suffering. Considering the wide-scale afflictions of the pandemic thus far, we face the challenge of explaining whether it is possible to think of this world as the work of an omnipotent Creator who is motivated by and/or defined as limitless love and compassion.

Rather than taking up the question of evil and suffering by walking down well-trodden paths in philosophy of religion which often address the problematic by focusing on divine attributes and the God-world relationship, this volume offers another path of inquiry by focusing on human vulnerability, potential, and resilience. Numerous Islamic philosophical texts, and therefore the work of contemporary Muslim thinkers who draw inspiration from and develop them in their own intellectual projects, view the question of evil and suffering with reference to what they mean for the becoming of human personhood, the actualization of latent spiritual possibilities, and the realization of human felicity and fulfilment.

By shifting focus from the divine to the human vis-à-vis the question of suffering, new insights and questions which are amenable to philosophical attention come to the fore: How do human presence and remoteness contribute to a wider, truly global understanding of the problem of evil? Can human suffering be a meaningful event, both on individual and collective scales? Can virtues be cultivated and character traits refined through a more robust understanding of human becoming in the face of suffering? Can traditions such as Islamic philosophy and Sufism—both of which place the human being and therefore the lived human experience at the center of their inquiries—help sharpen our analysis of evil and

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4 See Steven Taylor, *The Psychology of Pandemics: Preparing for the Next Global Outbreak of Infectious Disease* (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2020), chapter 3; Nicholas A. Christakis, *Apollo's Arrow: The Profound and Enduring Impact of Coronavirus on the Way We Live* (Boston: Little, Brown Spark, 2020), chapter 4.

suffering in ways heretofore unimagined by ordinary theological expositions which veer more towards the abstract?

More often than not, existing philosophical and theological responses confine themselves to purely theoretical discussions concerning evil and the existence/non-existence of God, thereby failing to address how people can respond to suffering and what difference it can make for their personhood. For instance, the so-called logical problem of evil states that God is good, just, and all-powerful. However, there is also "evil" in the world, which leads to the following dilemmas with respect to God's essential attributes:

1. God wishes to eradicate evil because He is good. So why is there evil?
2. God wishes to remove evil but cannot do so. Does He therefore lack power?
3. God can exterminate evil because He is all-powerful but will not do so. How then is He good?

The logical problem of evil therefore discounts the existence of God by arguing how evil is incompatible with a good, all-powerful God. Similarly, the evidential problem of evil explains to what extent certain instances, kinds, quantities, or distributions of evil constitute evidence against the existence of God. More particularly, atheist philosophers point to the cases of what Marilyn Adams calls "horrendous evils," i.e., "evils the participation in which (that is, the doing or suffering of which) constitutes prima facie reason to doubt whether the participant's life could (given their inclusion in it) be a great good to him/her on the whole."[5] They attempt to disprove God's existence by recounting stories of horrendous suffering in the world, such as the Holocaust and the Boxing Day Tsunami of 2004.

In light of these critiques, many contemporary theistic responses attempt to redefine evil and suffering through some kind of freewill defense that points to God's provision of free will and humanity's misuse of it.[6] The basic idea is that a world created with free agents who are free to perform good and evil, and who tend towards performing more good than evil, is better than a world containing no free creatures at all.

This perspective has a parallel in the Ashʿarī-Muʿtazilī debate on the question of evil in relation to divine justice. Muʿtazilī theodicy begins with the premise that it is impossible for God to perform a bad act. According to the Muʿtazilīs, human actions are the result of autonomous will and power. If human actions are determined by God, it would be unjust of Him to either reward or punish His creatures based on their actions.[7] This is so because if God is the sole agent of every good and

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5 Marilyn Adams, *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1999), 26.

6 See, in particular, Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977).

7 The Ashʿarīs believe humans "acquire" their acts, while God creates them—a theory known as *kasb* or "acquisition." For more on this doctrine, see Jan Thiele, "Conceptions of Self-Determination in Fourth/Tenth-Century Muslim Theology: Al-Bāqillānī's Theory of Human Acts in Its Historical Context," *Arabic Science and Philosophy* 26 (2016): 245–269. We are grateful to Ayman Shihadeh for this reference.

bad action, He would end up punishing the bad person for a crime that He Him-self has implanted in that person in the first place. Thus, God's justice requires humans to have free choice and control over their actions. The Muʿtazilīs also believe that, despite any suffering that may exist in it, the world is ultimately beneficial for people because it gives them an opportunity to attain rewards and blessings that far exceed the suffering. Furthermore, the Muʿtazilīs affirm that the moral value of an act is objective and within the reach of reason. In other words, ethical terms such as "good" or "bad" refer to real and objective properties of acts. The Ashʿarīs, who reject ethical realism, affirm God's unlim-ited omnipotence and will. In their view, God's actions are not restricted by ethical considerations. The Ashʿarīs embrace the doctrine of divine voluntarism that places God above the constraints of human reason. Unlike the Muʿtazilīs, they reject belief in free will and argue that all things are determined by divine decree.[8]

Other prominent responses to the problem of evil include "open theism," "skep-tical theism," and "Neoplatonic-Avicennan theodicy."[9] Open theism describes a position in which God's omniscience is interpreted in such a way that it does not allow God to either have foreknowledge (knowledge of what His creatures will do) or middle knowledge (knowledge of what free agents would freely choose to do in any possible situation). Hence, the occurrence of evil in the world is justified at the expense of diminishing confidence in such traditional attributes of God as omniscience or omnipotence.[10] Similarly, skeptical theism capitalizes on the idea of the inscrutability of God's ways and the epistemic distance that separates the divine from the human. It emphasizes the limitations of human cognition and its failure to judge as improbable the statement that God can serve a meaningful pur-pose through the existence of evil.[11] Regardless, both open and skeptical theism face serious criticism as they compromise traditional conceptions of God and His attributes. As for Neoplatonic-Avicennan theodicy, it affirms a cosmic order which represents overall goodness rather than evil. For Avicenna, who denies that there is absolute evil, evil is found only in the sublunar sphere and always exists in a

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8　See Muhammad U. Faruque, "Does God Create Evil? A Study of Fakhr al-Dīn Rāzī's Exegesis of *Sūrat al-falaq*," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 28, no. 3 (2017): 271–291.

9　One can also mention the theological inquiries of Sherman Jackson and Safaruk Chowdhury. The former creatively seeks to understanding suffering, particularly black suffering and its relation to divine providence, through the lens of Sunni (i.e., Ashʿarī, Muʿtazilī, and Māturīdī) theology. The latter uses the tools of analytic theology to address issues pertaining to human disability, the existence of Hell, natural selection, and the suffering of animals. See, respec-tively, Sherman Jackson, *Islam and the Problem of Black Suffering* (New York: Oxford Uni-versity Press, 2009); Safaruk Chowdhury, *Islamic Theology and the Problem of Evil* (Cairo: AUC Press, 2021).

10　See the inquiry in Clark Pinnock et al., *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Tradi-tional Understanding of God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1994).

11　William Alston, "The Inductive Argument from Evil and the Human Cognitive Condition," *Philo-sophical Perspectives* 5 (1991): 29–67.

relative way to sustain and perfect the natural order.[12] From a slightly different perspective, the great Islamic philosopher Mullā Ṣadrā makes sense of evil through his gradational ontology, distinguishing between the cosmos and the contingent effects of God in their totality from the differentiated details of the hierarchy of the cosmos.[13]

While engaging some of these views, the thinkers in this volume attempt to address both the theoretical and practical dimensions of the question of evil. They do not overlook the metaphysical origin of evil and suffering but tend to focus on anthropocentric conceptions of them without, however, denying God as the transcendent principle of human existence. That is to say, the focus in this volume is largely (although not exclusively) on the human subject and its ethical formation in the face of widescale evil and suffering.

Some of our authors explore virtue ethics in Sufism. By looking at how such virtues as patience, gratitude, and reliance upon God are utilized to overcome emotional pain and the internal reactions to outward suffering, these philosophers show that the problem of theodicy can be extended well beyond theoretical understandings of evil in relation to God's providence and the world. Several essays draw attention to the necessity of suffering in our experience of the world and the spiritually transformative power of pain. Sometimes it is through life's greatest hardships and suffering that we experience the deepest transformations. Seen in this way, suffering can become a means towards cultivating higher modes of selfhood and can be experienced not only as hardship, but also as a form of sacred instruction and a divine gift and blessing.

Apart from the importance of cultivating virtues in the face of trials and suffering, some of our philosophers draw on the spiritual significance of the body to set forth accounts of what it means to be present, as an embodied mode of love and attentive care, with those who are experiencing trauma or are dying. Such a presence, which is now enacted through our bodies, is not about "controlling" or "curing" suffering but about meditatively bearing witness to it. Islamic perspectives on embodiment as a locus of sacral significance therefore offer us resources to conceive of human fragility and vulnerability not as encumbrances to be stoically surpassed or abstractly theorized about, but as experiential realities that lie at the core of our human condition. Still other contributions in this volume emphasize love and its transformative power both as a response to the human condition of suffering and as an intentional route to address the suffering and isolation caused by human injustice.

From the Divine to the Human thus intends to bring new options to the table by drawing our focus away from traditional philosophy of religion—which tends to

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12 Mohammed Rustom, "Devil's Advocate: ʿAyn al-Quḍāt's Defence of Iblis in Context," *Studia Islamica* 115, no. 1 (2020): 65–100; Ayman Shihadeh, "Avicenna's Theodicy and al-Rāzī's Anti-Theodicy," *Intellectual History of the Islamicate World* 7, no. 1 (2019): 61–84.
13 Ibrahim Kalin, "Mullā Ṣadrā and the Best of All Possible Worlds," *Oxford Journal of Islamic Studies* 18, no. 2 (2007): 183–201; Sajjad Rizvi, "Considering Divine Providence in Mullā Ṣadrā Šīrāzī (d. 1045/1636): The Problem of Evil, Theodicy, and the Divine Eros," *Oriens* 49, no. 3–4 (2021): 318–369.

zero in on God and divine attributes—and redirecting it to human beings and their ethical and spiritual growth. In doing so, the contributors propose new perspectives based on various pre-modern and contemporary materials that can enrich the emerging field of the global philosophy of religion, thereby radically transforming contemporary debates on the nature of evil and suffering.

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