

3 | Natural Evil and the Role of God

California had a record-breaking fire in 2020. By the end of the year, almost 4 percent of its land had burned. Experts highlighted a number of reasons for the devastating fire. Among them were drought and increased warming due to climate change. As a response to the fire and drought, a number of Muslim organizations in California – including Zaytuna College, the South Bay Islamic Association, the Evergreen Islamic Center, and the Islamic Center of Livermore – organized a prayer for rain. The person who was invited to give a sermon and offer a prayer was Hamza Yusuf Hanson, cofounder and president of Zaytuna College, the first accredited Muslim liberal arts college in the United States. In his sermon, Hanson highlighted that this world is a place of tribulations, difficulties, grief, and sorrow. Whatever comes from God is pure grace. People should respond to calamities with gratitude. God created humans to test them. But God also says in the Qur'an that if people turn to him with repentance (*tawba*), then God will send them what is good.¹ People sin, but when they face their sin's outcome, they don't take responsibility. Hanson made a reference to one of the principles that is often stressed in the Qur'an: "Each soul is accountable for what evil it commits, and no soul shall bear the burden of another."² He pointed out that the implication of this verse is in the hereafter. People suffer because of other people's irresponsibility in this world. God tests people collectively, and that is why innocents such

¹ Qur'an 4:17–18.

² Qur'an 6:164.

as children and animals suffer during tribulations. However, these misfortunes are an opportunity to turn toward God with repentance and ask for forgiveness. Hanson concluded his sermon with prayer and a supplication of repentance.³ A number of imams in California also organized a prayer for rain with their communities.

The Muslim community's response to the lack of rain in California is not a new tradition. It is part of a practice that dates to the Prophet Muhammad. In times of drought, Muhammad would often offer a prayer for rain (*salat al-istisqa*) and encourage his followers to do the same.⁴ The implication of this prayer is that everything is in God's control, and he has power over nature. Therefore, God is the one who can send the rain. This approach to drought manifests an Islamic theological perspective on natural evil.

Natural evil remains a major challenge to the traditional view of God. Every day, about 150,000 people die. Among the leading causes of these deaths are cardiovascular diseases (48,742), cancers (26,181), respiratory diseases (10,724), and neonatal disorders (4,887).⁵ In 2017, around 56 million people died. Approximately half of them were aged seventy years or older, 27 percent were aged fifty to sixty-nine years, 14 percent were aged fifteen to forty-nine years, only 1 percent were aged five to fourteen years, and around 10 percent were under the age of five.⁶ In 2019, an estimated 5.2 million children under five years old died. Many of these deaths were due to birth complications.⁷ According to some estimates, every year,

³ "Turning to God in Tribulation," Muslim Community Center – MCC East Bay, YouTube video, posted September 25, 2020, www.youtube.com/watch?v=t-pukZSJk3c.

⁴ Muhammad b. 'Isa al-Tirmidhi, *Jami' al-Tirmidhi: kitab abwab al-safar, bab ma ja'a fi salat al-istisqa*.

⁵ Jenna Ross, "Global Deaths: This Is How COVID-19 Compares to Other Diseases," World Economic Forum, May 16, 2020, www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/05/how-many-people-die-each-day-covid-19-coronavirus.

⁶ Hannah Ritchie, "What Do People Die From?," Our World in Data, February 14, 2018, <https://ourworldindata.org/what-does-the-world-die-from>.

⁷ "Children: Improving Survival and Well-Being," World Health Organization, September 8, 2020, www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/children-reducing-mortality.

nearly 300,000 women die in childbirth,⁸ and around 60,000 people die because of natural disasters.⁹ I should also mention animal suffering. For example, it is believed that over three billion animals were killed or displaced during Australia's devastating bushfires from June 2019 to February 2020. It was one of the worst wildlife disasters in modern history.¹⁰

These examples show that there is immense suffering that is associated with natural evil. According to Islamic theology, God is the sole creator and owner of the universe. There is nothing outside of his power and knowledge. He is merciful and compassionate. If this is the case, how do Muslim theologians reconcile natural evil with the existence of God? In this chapter, I explore their perspectives on natural evil and suffering.

The key term in Islamic literature concerning evil is *sharr*, and its opposite is *khayr* (good). As a term, *sharr* means something that is disliked, the spread of what is harmful, something that is incompatible with one's nature. The Qur'an employs the word in various ways. In some cases, *sharr* is described as what is impermissible and sinful. It also implies that people may not completely know what is evil and what is good.¹¹ The Qur'an uses other words that are associated with evil and suffering. Among them are trial (*musiba*), injustice (*zulm*), harm (*darra*), indecency (*fahsha*), misery (*shaqawa*), moral corruption (*fasad*), ill (*su'*), grief (*huzn*), sin (*sayyia*), and pain (*alam*). Muslim theologians offer a number of theodicies for natural evil. One of them is to emphasize God's power and full authority over creation.

⁸ Liz Ford, "Why Do Women Still Die Giving Birth?," *Guardian*, September 24, 2018, www.theguardian.com/global-development/2018/sep/24/why-do-women-still-die-giving-birth.

⁹ Hannah Ritchie and Max Roser, "Natural Disasters," Our World in Data, last updated November 2019, <https://ourworldindata.org/natural-disasters>.

¹⁰ Daniel Vernick, "3 Billion Animals Harmed by Australia's Fires," WWF, July 28, 2020, www.worldwildlife.org/stories/3-billion-animals-harmed-by-australia-s-fires.

¹¹ Qur'an 2:216.

God and the Creation of Natural Evil

The Qur'an points out that God is the creator and has power over everything: "Blessed is He in whose hands lies sovereignty, and he has power over all things. Everything in the heavens and earth belongs to God."¹² The Qur'an also mentions that God does what he wills:

Say, "God, Owner of Sovereignty, You give sovereignty to whom you will, and You take sovereignty away from whom You will. You honor whom You will and You disgrace whom You will. All good is in Your hand. You have power over everything. You cause the night to pass into the day, and the day to pass into the night. You bring the living out of the dead and the dead out of the living; You provide for whoever You will without limit."¹³

In another verse, the Qur'an reads: "If God afflicts you with misfortune, no one can remove it but Him, and if He intends good for you, no one can repel His grace. He grants it to whom He pleases of His servants; and He is the Forgiving, the Merciful."¹⁴ The Islamic scripture also implies that God is the creator of natural disasters such as drought, famine, and earthquakes: "We inflicted Pharaoh's people with famine and shortage of crops, so that they might take heed. No misfortune can happen, either in the earth or in yourselves, that was not set down in writing before We brought it into being, that is easy for God."¹⁵

The Mutazilites, a theological school that emphasizes reason (*'aql*), argue that justice is at the center of God's creation, including natural disasters. That is why the Mutazilites do not believe that there is evil in God's creation. Mutazilite scholars argue that God only creates what is the most useful and beneficial for the people

¹² Qur'an 67:1; 3:129.

¹³ Qur'an 3:26–27.

¹⁴ Qur'an 10:107.

¹⁵ Qur'an 7:130 and 57:22.

(the doctrine of *al-aslah*). For them, in order to understand whether an act is evil or good, one must determine whether it is harmful or advantageous for people. God always creates with purpose, and there is no waste in his creation.¹⁶ Otherwise, one may think that God is involved in unnecessary creation and indifferent to injustice. Therefore, the Mutazilites point out that it is incumbent on God (*aslah 'ala Allah*) to create with justice and purpose. For them, God is the creator of natural disasters and illnesses, but these things are not evil in reality. The creation of evil is inconsistent with God's justice.

Unlike the Mutazilites, the Asharites, a theological school that emphasizes the authority of revelation over reason, believe that God is not obligated to create with justice or according to the advantages of people. They highlight God's power (*qudrah*). The Ashari school, which became the mainstream school in the Sunni tradition, argues that everything belongs to God. God acts the way he wills, and one cannot seek wisdom in or benefit from God's actions. They support their points with passages from the Qur'an:

Those who are wretched shall be in the Fire, they shall have therein groaning and wailing, remaining therein for as long as the heavens and the earth endure, unless your Lord wills otherwise. Surely, your Lord does whatever He wills. As for those who are blessed, they will be in Paradise, remaining therein for as long as the heavens and the earth endure, unless your Lord wills otherwise – a gift without an end.¹⁷

With these references, the Asharites point out that God's acts are not driven by what benefits people.

For the Asharites, natural evil and the suffering that results from it cannot be considered harmful or disadvantageous. In this situation, what matters is not people's perspective but rather how God sees it.

¹⁶ Avni İlhan, "Aslah," in *İslam Ansiklopedisi* (Istanbul: TDV, 1991), 3:495.

¹⁷ Qur'an 11:106–8.

God is not obliged to create with wisdom, as this limits God's eternal power. To counter the Mutazilite position, Abu al-Hasan al-Ashari (d. 936) brought up the case of the three brothers (*al-ikhwah al-thalathah*) and their salvation in the hereafter. The first brother is Muslim, the second brother is an unbeliever, and the third brother died when he was a child. When asked what would become of the brothers when they died, the Mutazilite scholar Abu Ali al-Jubbai (d. 915) answered that the first brother would enter heaven and the second would go to hell. While the third brother would not be punished, he would not enter heaven either. Al-Ashari then asked what would happen if the third brother would say, "Oh God, if you would give me more life to live, I would have faith in you, obey you to enter heaven. You should have done what is the most useful for me." The Mutazilite scholar answered that God created what is the most appropriate for the child, because if he lived, he would rebel against God and would go to hell. Al-Ashari declared that this answer is unjust to the second brother, who died as an unbeliever, and inconsistent with God's justice. Because the second brother could ask, "Oh God, why did not you take my life when I was a child, I would not rebel against you and deserve to go to hell?"¹⁸

The Maturidi school offers a middle way concerning God's creation and natural evil. They emphasize God's wisdom (*hikmah*). There is nothing that is inappropriate and unnecessary in God's creation. Wisdom in the universe is the manifestation of God's name All Wise (al-Hakim). In this regard, there is no imperfection in God's creation. They still disagree with the Mutazilites' approach that God creates what is the most beneficial to people. The Maturidis contest that something that is considered evil (*fasad*) from our perspective might not be evil in God's wisdom. For example, God creates those who are disobedient to him and provides them with what they need. While this seems to be inconsistent with the doctrine of *al-aslah*, it might be compatible with God's wisdom.

¹⁸ Mehmet Bulut, "İhve-i Selase," in *İslam Ansiklopedisi* (Istanbul: TDV, 2000), 22:6.

Therefore, God's justice cannot be held to the standard of people's reason and their understanding of justice. While we do not have the right to say that God is obligated to create with justice and according to what benefits people, we can say that God creates with wisdom. People may not be able to see the wisdom in God's creation, but it does not mean that there is no wisdom.

The Maturidis provided arguments against the doctrine of *al-aslah* from the Qur'an. First, a number of verses encourage believers to pray and seek refuge in God. For them, if one accepts the Mutazilites' position, then there is no need to pray, be thankful, and seek refuge in God. According to their view, God has already given people everything they need. If this is the case, people are seeking God's help for two reasons: to ask for something that they do not need or to hide a blessing that God already gave them. This is nothing but being ungrateful. Second, the Qur'an indicates that "God is the Protector of those who believe: He brings them out of the darkness and into the light. As for the disbelievers, their protectors are false gods who take them from the light into the darkness. Those are the inhabitants of the Fire, and there they will remain forever."¹⁹ In this case, both believers and nonbelievers have the same conditions. However, God favors the believers and brings them out of the darkness. For the Maturidis, this verse contradicts the idea of *al-aslah*, because God should be an ally to the nonbelievers too. Third, the Qur'an points out that "those who disbelieve should not think that the time We give them is good for them. In fact, we give them time only that they may increase in sin, and there is a humiliating punishment for them."²⁰ Again, if the Mutazilites' position is correct, then God would not give more time to disbelievers to be more sinful, because this is not something that benefits them. Fourth, the Qur'an reads: "So let neither their wealth nor their children impress you. Through these God plans to punish them in this world, and

¹⁹ Qur'an 2:257.

²⁰ Qur'an 3:178.

that their souls should depart while they are disbelievers.”²¹ If God gives people only things that benefit them, how can one explain this verse? Because it implies that what God bestows on people is something that is working against them?²²

Innocent Suffering

One of the challenges that the first two schools had to address was the suffering of innocents because of natural evil. For the Ashari school, while God will eventually reward those who die in the hereafter, they also believe that God does not have to do so. The reward is part of God’s grace. Said Nursi (d. 1960), for example, points out that innocent people who die because of natural evil such as earthquakes will be considered martyrs, and their temporary life will turn into an eternal one. Their properties will be considered as charity (*sadaqa*) that will benefit them eternally.²³ There is divine mercy within their suffering. This world is a place of trial and examination. If the innocents were spared during natural disasters such as earthquakes, then everyone would turn to God. People would not have the opportunity to explore their spiritual and moral progress to the fullest extent. There would not be any difference between Abu Jahl and Abu Bakr. Abu Jahl is a figure who represents evil in Islamic literature because of his disobedience to God. He was the leading person who persecuted the Prophet Muhammad and his followers. Unlike Abu Jahl, Abu Bakr is known for his obedience to God and was one of the most loyal companions of the Prophet.

²¹ Qur’an 9:55.

²² For the Maturidis’ criticism of the idea of *aslah*, see Hülya Alper, “Maturidi’nin Mutezile eleştirisi: Tanrı en iyiyi yaratmak zorunda mıdır?” *Kelam Araştırmaları* 11:1 (2013): 17–36.

²³ Nursi, *Sözler*, 243. For an in-depth study of Nursi’s views on theodicy, see Tubanur Yesilhark Ozkan, *A Muslim Response to Evil: Said Nursi on the Theodicy* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2015).

He is known for his goodness and generosity in the tradition.²⁴ Nursi turns to the Qur'an for this position: "Be mindful of a trial that will not affect only the wrongdoers among you."²⁵ In his interpretation of the same verse, al-Qurtubi (d. 1273) points to a hadith in which the Prophet uses the parable of a ship to explain the suffering of innocent people. On this ship, while some people are above deck, the others are below. If those on the lower deck in need of water would make a hole in the bottom of the ship instead of asking from those who are on the upper deck, the whole ship would sink. When people live in a community, "doing wrong and allowing wrong" will affect all members, both wrongdoers and innocents.²⁶

The Mutazilites point out that there are lessons for people to learn from the innocents' suffering. While the innocents would be rewarded (*i'wad*) with eternal bliss, it is a test for their parents. The ideal response of the parents is to interpret the death of their children as ultimately good. Zayn al-Din ibn 'Ali ibn Ahmad ibn Muhammad (d. 1557) was a Mutazilite scholar of Twelver Shiism. He went through considerable suffering in his life. Among his sons, only one reached adulthood; another died in infancy. He also wrote a treatise on the death of his son. Like the scholars of the Mutazilite school, Zayn al-Din highlights the innocents' compensation in the hereafter. He also points out that there is even a reward for the suffering parents who lose their children. The children will, for example, intercede for their parents' salvation in the hereafter. The parents will be forgiven of their sins because of their suffering. In addition, the parents are not shamed and disappointed because of a child who grows up to have a sinful life. God tests his servants with loss so that they can learn to be patient and have the merits of an eternal life.²⁷

²⁴ Nursi, 242.

²⁵ Qur'an 8:25.

²⁶ Caner K. Dagli, "Commentary on *Surat al-Anfal*," in Nasr et al., *Study Quran*, 489.

²⁷ Eric Linn Ormsby, "Two Epistles of Consolation: Al-Shahid al-Thani and Said Nursi on Theodicy," in *Theodicy and Justice in Modern Islamic Thought: The Case of Said Nursi*, ed. Ibrahim M. Abu-Rabi' (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2010), 152–53.

Suffering for purification from sin and the merits of an eternal life are echoed in a number of hadiths. The Prophet, for example, says that even a minor thing, including the pricking of a thorn, will be compensated and that God will forgive or wipe out one's sin through suffering: "No fatigue, nor disease, nor sorrow, nor sadness, nor hurt, nor distress befalls a Muslim, even if it were the prick he receives from a thorn, but that God expiates some of his sins for that."²⁸ Aisha, one of the Prophet's wives, states that if a believer is very sinful and does not perform enough good deeds to wipe these sins out, then God will afflict the person with suffering in order to forgive their sin.²⁹ This approach is very similar to Jewish theologian Saadia Gaon's view. As mentioned in Chapter 1, Gaon explains that God inflicts those whom he loves with unmerited suffering in order to justify their eternal reward in the hereafter.³⁰

Animal Suffering

Another pressing question that concerns Muslim theologians is the suffering of animals. In a number of hadiths, the Prophet Muhammad addresses animal suffering. It is also reported that Muhammad miraculously communicated with animals. In one case, a camel complained to the Prophet about being mistreated by its owner. Muhammad warned the owner and asked him to improve the situation of the camel. The Qur'an mentions that sentient beings will be resurrected on the day of judgment: "There is no creature living on the earth, nor a bird flying on its two wings, but they all are communities like you. We have missed nothing in the Book. Then to

²⁸ *Sahih al-Bukhari, Kitab al-Marda: bab ma ja'a fi kaffarat al-mardi.*

²⁹ Imam Khatib al-Tabrizi, *Mishkat al-Masabih: kitab al-Janaiz, bab 'iyad al-marid wa sawab al-marid.*

³⁰ Lenn E. Goodman, "Judaism and the Problem of Evil," in Meister and Moser, *Cambridge Companion*, 198–99.

their Lord they will be gathered.”³¹ In line with this Qur’anic position, a hadith mentions that animals will be compensated for the suffering and injustice they experience: “On the Day of Arising, all of creation will be gathered together: the cattle, the riding-beasts, the birds, and every other thing, and it shall be by God’s justice that He takes the hornless sheep’s case against the horned one. Then He shall say, ‘Be dust.’”³² According to the Mutazilites, God has an “ethical obligation” to compensate animals for their suffering. For the Asharites, however, it is inappropriate to attribute “obligation” to God. For them, “God is expected to recompense animals for their innocent suffering but will do so out of His generosity and wisdom, not because universal moral axioms compel Him to do so.”³³ Despite their disagreements, all theological schools believe that there will be compensation for the suffering of animals.

Natural Evil as the Manifestation of God’s Names

As mentioned in Chapter 2, believers may know God through his names, which are manifested in his creation. The manifestation of God’s names requires unlimited changes, transformations, and alterations in the universe that “necessitate death and extinction, decline and separation.”³⁴ Natural disasters can be considered as part of the manifestations of God’s names. According to Nursi, this world has three faces. The first face mirrors the divine names. Death, separation, and nonexistence cannot be part of this dimension, which reveals the names through transformation and change. The second face is related to the hereafter. Everything in this world

³¹ Qur’an 6:38.

³² Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, *The Remembrance of Death and the Afterlife*, trans. Timothy Winter (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1989), 200–1.

³³ Timothy Winter, “Islam and the Problem of Evil,” in Meister and Moser, *Cambridge Companion*, 237.

³⁴ Said Nursi, *The Letters* (Istanbul: Sözlür, 2004), 333.

serves as a means for eternal life. From this perspective, death and separation will eventually lead to life and eternity. The third face looks to transient beings, including humans. People are attached to ephemeral beings. Their attachment may lead to pain and suffering. If people look at this dimension of the world from the perspective of the divine names, they will see that it also manifests life and eternity. Nursi concludes that transformation and renewal, including human and animal suffering, are manifestations of God's names.³⁵

Evil Is the Privation of Good

Like many Christian theologians, Muslim scholars also point out that evil is the privation of good. Because God is perfect and beautiful, only good comes from him. The beings in the material world are limited because of their nature. Evil is the lack of good. It does not have a source, as God is the source of creation. Light, existence, and mercy come from God. Evil cannot come from him, as it is nonexistence.³⁶

To make their point, these scholars classify the natural evil that exists in the world into two categories: essential evil (*sharr bidh-dhāt*) and accidental evil (*sharr bil-'araḍ*). Mulla Sadra (d. 1636), for example, argues that essential evil does not exist in the world, as it is the lack of good. Accidental evil is the result of creatures' relations with one another. For example, cold and warm are not evil in their nature; however, they can be harmful in relation to creation. Fruits may decay because of the temperature is inappropriate; however, that does not make cold and warm evil in nature. Another example is clouds. They are not evil in nature; however, if they block the sunlight, then they cause harm when a fruit tree cannot grow. Clouds may cause evil in relation to the sun.³⁷

³⁵ Nursi, 337.

³⁶ Sedat Baran, "Molla Sadra'da Algısal Kötülük Bağlamında Şerr Problemi," *Şarkiyat İlmi Araştırmalar Dergisi* 11:1 (2019): 30.

³⁷ Baran, 18.

Goodness Dominates the World

Muslim scholars also state that evil that exists in the world is minor, and overall, goodness dominates the world. The Qur'an points out that God created everything with perfection.³⁸ The evil that exists is necessary and has benefits for creation. For this view, Ibn Sina (d. 1037) gives the example of fire. There is no doubt that the creation of fire is good and benefits people. However, when fire touches things, it may cause pain and suffering. This does not make fire evil, as the minor harm that is associated with fire is necessary for its creation.³⁹ In this regard, the existence of fire is far better than its nonexistence.

Concerning evil and goodness, the scholars also point out that one cannot abandon the greater good for the lesser evil. To support this point, al-Ghazali (d. 1111) gives the example of a cancerous hand. In order to keep the body healthy, one may justify the amputation of a cancerous hand. While the amputation may sound evil, there is a greater good behind it: keeping the body healthy.⁴⁰ A similar example comes from Nursi:

A peahen lays one hundred eggs and they are worth five hundred kurush. If the hen sits on the hundred eggs and eighty go bad and twenty hatch into peacocks, can it be said that the loss was high and the affair, evil; that it was bad to put the broody hen on the eggs and an evil occurred? No, it was not thus, it was good. For the peacock species and egg family lost eighty eggs worth four hundred kurush, but gained twenty peacocks worth eighty liras.⁴¹

The point is that while eighty of the eggs were lost, incubation itself is not evil. The quantity is not relevant either. The gain is much higher compared to what is lost. The greater good cannot be abandoned for the lesser evil.

³⁸ Qur'an 32:7.

³⁹ Shams Inati, *The Problem of Evil: Ibn Sina's Theodicy* (New York: Global, 2000), 144.

⁴⁰ Al-Ghazali, *The Ninety-Nine Names of God*, 55.

⁴¹ Nursi, *Letters*, 60–61. Kurush was the currency used by the Ottoman Empire until 1923.

Evil Reveals What Is Good

Muslim scholars also underline that our notions of good and beauty will remain incomplete and static without evil. It is through evil and suffering that one can experience various degrees of goodness and beauty in the world. Good and evil often come together. For this view, Rumi (d. 1273) gives a number of examples: “Ruined the house for the sake of the golden treasure, and with that same treasure builds it better (than before); cut off the water and cleansed the river-bed, then caused drinking-water to flow in the river-bed; cleft the skin and drew out the iron point (of the arrow or spear) – then fresh skin grew over it (the wound).”⁴² Rumi then concludes that the divine action is manifested in opposites and this is its nature.

Rumi gives other examples concerning the problem of evil. He notes that even if evil comes from God, still there is no imperfection in his creation. Creating evil is also part of God’s perfection. To support his argument, Rumi describes a painter who created two pictures: one with a beautiful woman and the prophet Joseph and another with Satan. Both pictures reveal the painter’s art. The evil in the picture also demonstrates the artist’s skills. If painters are unable to draw evil things as well as good things, that shows a lack of talent. Rumi then states that evil and good in the universe are similar to this analogy. They are part of God’s creation. Both illness and death are part of God’s art.⁴³ Rumi also points out that there is no teacher without a student seeking knowledge. There is no doctor without a sick person seeking treatment. The existence of a doctor depends on the sickness of people. However, this does not mean that the doctor wills people’s sickness or the teacher desires students’ ignorance.⁴⁴

⁴² Jalaluddin Rumi, *Mathnawi*, book 1:307–10, trans. Reynold A. Nicholson (London: Cambridge University Press, 1926), 2:20.

⁴³ Jalaluddin Rumi, *Mathnawi*, book 2:2536–44, trans. Reynold A. Nicholson (London: Cambridge University Press, 1926), 2:352.

⁴⁴ Jalaluddin Rumi, *Fihî Ma Fih* [in Turkish], trans. M. Ülker Tarıkahya (Istanbul: Milli Eğitim Basımevi, 1985), 273–74.

Al-Ghazali offers similar reasoning: “As long as the imperfect is not created, the perfect will remain unknown. If beasts had not been created, the dignity of man would not be manifest. The perfect and the imperfect are correlated. Divine generosity and wisdom require the simultaneous creation of the perfect and the imperfect.”⁴⁵

The Best Possible World

The “this world is the best possible world” approach is another response to natural evil. In Islamic theology, this view was articulated by al-Ghazali. He argues that this is the best possible world created by God, and another possible world would be impossible (*laysa fi'l-imkan abda' mimma kan*).⁴⁶ Al-Ghazali maintains that even if all people’s minds were put together and their intelligence was increased to the highest level, nothing would change in God’s creation, as it is the best possible creation. They would eventually come to the conclusion that there is no injustice in God’s creation because God creates with wisdom and measure. To support his view, al-Ghazali points to the measured creation even in the case of ordinary creatures: “Even if we wished to mention the marvels in a bed-bug, an ant, a bee or a spider – for these are the tiniest animals – in the way they construct their dwellings, gather their food, consort with their mates and store provisions, ... we would be unable to do so.”⁴⁷ He also illustrates the human body as the best form of creation. If we think of the way our eyes, nose, skin, and fingernails are created, the way they are placed on our body, their functions, and so on, there could not be a better possibility.⁴⁸ In the case of the eyes,

⁴⁵ Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din* (Cairo: Al-Quds, 2012), 4:399, cited in Eric Linn Ormsby, *Theodicy in Islamic Thought: The Dispute over al-Ghazali's Best of All Possible Worlds* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014), 40.

⁴⁶ Al-Ghazali, *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din*, 4:400.

⁴⁷ Ormsby, *Theodicy in Islamic Thought*, 46.

⁴⁸ Ormsby, 49–50.

al-Ghazali wrote, “[God] placed the eye in the place in the body most fitting for it. Had He created it on the back of the head or on the leg or on the hand or on top of the head, it would be obvious what shortcoming would befall it, and what exposure to injuries.”⁴⁹ Al-Ghazali then concludes that if there would be a better world, this would be against God’s power and would be a sign of divine weakness.

Al-Ghazali’s position is also supported by Ibn Arabi (d. 1240). Ibn Arabi reasons that the universe is the manifestation of God. The existence of the universe becomes a means of knowing God. Therefore, the universe is beautiful and perfect. It is the mirror of God’s beauty and perfection.⁵⁰ Ibn Arabi also points to a hadith of the Prophet: “God is beautiful and he loves beauty.” If God is beautiful, that means the reflection of his beauty, all creation, is also beautiful and perfect.⁵¹

Qutb al-Din al-Shirazi (d. 1311) also maintains al-Ghazali’s position. He notes that if there were the possibility of creating a better world and God did not create it, that means God is not omniscient or omnipotent. The other possibility is that God is not generous. However, these attributes cannot be associated with God.⁵²

In support of al-Ghazali’s best possible world, some scholars also challenge the idea of a world with pure good or without evil. Mulla Sadra, for example, entertains the possibility with some counterarguments. In order to have a world without evil, Mulla Sadra offers the following options:

- a. God would not create this world.
- b. God would create the natural world with a nonmaterial nature.
- c. God would create this world without the basic attributes.

For the first option to occur, God would forsake and abandon many goods. This itself is evil and inconsistent with God’s generosity. For

⁴⁹ Ormsby, 49.

⁵⁰ Şahin Efil, “İbn Arabî’ye göre tasavvuf felsefesinde kötülük problemi ve teodise,” *Felsefe Dünyası* 1:53 (2011): 94.

⁵¹ Ormsby, *Theodicy in Islamic Thought*, 104.

⁵² Baran, “Molla Sadra’da Algısal Kötülük,” 24.

the second option to be true, the creatures would be part of a non-material world. In the case of the third option, God would create things without their natural attributes. For example, God would create fire, but it would not have its attribute of burning. This is not possible either.⁵³

Al-Ghazali's idea has been criticized by a number of scholars. Their major criticism is that this position puts a limit on God. Al-Biqai (d. 1480), for example, points out that there is considerable suffering in this world. There are people who are born with disabilities; people can potentially hate and commit evils. How can one say there could not be a better world? God could create everyone as a prophet, and we could enjoy our heaven in this world in which there would be no death.⁵⁴ Another Muslim theologian, Ibn al-Munayyir (d. 1284), also challenges al-Ghazali's position. Concerning the best possible world, al-Munayyir points out that there are many people with disabilities. If the point of imperfections in this world is to know and understand what is perfect, God could just create one individual with imperfection, and this would be sufficient for us to understand God's perfection. However, the number of beings with imperfections exceeds the number of those with perfection.⁵⁵ Al-Ghazali's view was also criticized because it had some similarities with the Mutazilite doctrine of *al-aslah*.⁵⁶

What Appears to Be Evil May Not Be Evil in Reality

Muslim scholars also discuss evil as something that may eventually turn out to be good even if people do not grasp it in the first place. In this context, the following verse of the Qur'an is often used as an argument: "It may be that you hate something while it is good for

⁵³ Baran, 27.

⁵⁴ Ormsby, *Theodicy in Islamic Thought*, 135–38.

⁵⁵ Ormsby, 200–1.

⁵⁶ Ormsby, 34.

you, and it may be that you love something while it is evil for you.”⁵⁷ Here the Qur’an lays out a principle: What is good cannot be based on what you like. What you like may turn out to be evil, and what you dislike might turn out to be good for you. This approach can be found in the Prophet Muhammad’s life, as he often prayed, “Oh God, if it is good for my life in this world and the hereafter then bestow upon me.”⁵⁸ Here the Prophet asks God not for what he likes or dislikes but rather what is eventually good for him.

Rumi mentions that creation cannot be based on our own desires or what we like or dislike. Depending on the context, what is poisonous for one might be a cure for another. He gives the example of a venomous snake. While venom is part of the snake’s life, it is lethal for people. While for the animals living in the water, the sea is heaven, for the animals living outside of the sea, it is a form of suffering and death.⁵⁹

Natural Evil as a Test and Warning for the People

Based on some of the verses from the Qur’an, Muslim scholars also look at natural evil as a test and warning from God. A number of verses are often cited to support this view:

We shall certainly test you with fear and hunger, and loss of wealth, lives, and crops. But give good news to the patient, those who, when a misfortune befalls them, say, “We belong to God and to Him we shall return.”⁶⁰

[God tests you to see] which of you is best in conduct.⁶¹

⁵⁷ Qur’an 2:216.

⁵⁸ Al-Bukhari, *al-Adab al-Mufrad: kitab al-du‘a’, bab al-du‘a’ ‘ind al-istikhara*.

⁵⁹ Rumi, *Mathnawi*, book 4:65–70, trans. Reynold A. Nicholson (London: Cambridge University Press, 1930), 4:276.

⁶⁰ Qur’an 2:155–56.

⁶¹ Qur’an 11:7.

[God] created death and life to test which of you is best in deeds.⁶²

Every soul will taste death: We test you with evil and good, and to Us you will be returned.⁶³

In the face of natural evil and suffering, Muslim scholars often emphasize this world as a place of test, not reward. The Qur'an also mentions that people will face trials and tribulations because of their sin and heedlessness: "Whatever misfortune befalls you, it is because of what your own hands have done, God pardons much."⁶⁴ In the Qur'an as in the Bible, this approach is best manifested in the stories of the prophets. Among them are Noah, Moses, and Hud. Their people are often punished through natural disasters as a result of their sin and disobedience.⁶⁵

Spiritual Responses to Natural Evil

There is enormous pain and suffering associated with natural evil. In the face of natural evil, Islamic tradition underscores a number of spiritual responses. One of them is *tawakkul*: trust in divine providence. People going through suffering do everything in their power to overcome the consequences of natural evil and then put their trust in God. This spiritual response is often explained through one of the traditions. It is reported that the Prophet noticed that one of his companions was leaving his camel without tying it. When the Prophet asked him why he did not tie it, the companion answered that he put his trust in God. The Prophet responded that the man should first tie his camel, then put his trust in God.⁶⁶ *Tawakkul* is to believe that God is the creator and in control of everything.

⁶² Qur'an 67:2.

⁶³ Qur'an 21:35.

⁶⁴ Qur'an 42:30.

⁶⁵ Qur'an 7:130.

⁶⁶ *Jami' al-Tirmidhi: kitab sifat al-qiyama*.

In the midst of pain and suffering, the idea is to turn to God, as he loves when people ask for his help. The Qur'an points out that God answers the prayers of those who seek refuge in him with humility.⁶⁷

Times of trials and tribulations due to evil and suffering are also times for worship and prayer. For example, the lack of rain is considered an opportunity to worship and pray to God.⁶⁸ That is why the prayer for rain does not simply ask God for rain; it is an occasion to turn to God. Nuh Ha Mim Keller points to this aspect of the trials as follows: "If not for the problems, fears, and pain man faces, he would remain turned away from the door of the divine generosity, and miss an enormous share of worship that benefits him in this world and the next."⁶⁹

Another spiritual response is patience (*sabr*). The Quran often points out that patience is one of the traits of believers. It indicates that those who respond to suffering and evil with patience and turn to God will be rewarded.

In this chapter, I have demonstrated that while Muslim theologians have different approaches to natural evil and offer different theodicies, they all believe that God is the sole agent in the creation of natural evil. They highlight different attributes of God in relation to natural evil. The Islamic approach to evil and suffering is succinctly articulated by Erzurumlu İbrahim Hakkı (d. 1780), a Sufi poet and philosopher. I conclude this chapter with his lines:

God turns evil into good
 Never think that He does otherwise
 The wise ones observe it
 Let's see then what God does
 Whatever God does, He does it beautifully

⁶⁷ Qur'an 40:60.

⁶⁸ Nursi, *Sözler*, 425.

⁶⁹ Nun Ha Mim Keller, *Sea without Shore: A Manual of the Sufi Path* (Beltsville, MD: Amana, 2011), 372.

Put your trust in God
Don't worry, leave it to Him
Be patient and accept it
Let's see then what God does
Whatever God does, He does it beautifully⁷⁰

⁷⁰ Erzurumlu İbrahim Hakkı, *Marifetname* (Kahire: 1251H/1815), 385 (my translation).