Islamic Theology and the Problem of Evil

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Introduction

On June 14, 2017, in the month of Ramadan, around 1:00 a.m. London local time, when many residents were asleep in their homes, but a number of Muslims were either waking up for the predawn meal before the commencement of the next day's fast or finishing their late-night prayers, the emergency services received a distress call that a fire had broken out on a twenty-four-story tower block in West London called Grenfell Tower. This fire tore through the exterior cladding of the building in a matter of minutes, and within an hour, despite the heroic efforts of the fire service personnel, the fire had become an uncontrollable blaze claiming the lives of thirty people trapped in the top floors. By early morning, a couple of hours later, the victim tally had doubled and the injury count quadrupled, and the fire in the Tower was now raging fiercely. The night unfolded with destruction and devastation as everything succumbed to the fire's blazing reach. It took over a full day to put out the fire and begin the preliminary investigative procedures. Embattled, weary, and traumatized, both the emergency services and Grenfell Tower survivors could not comprehend how and why such a tragedy occurred. This was the deadliest structural fire in the United Kingdom since the 1988 Piper Alpha disaster and the worst recorded residential fire accident since the Second World War. All that remains, other than ethereal memories and traumatized survivors, is a hollow and charred corpse of a building in full view of the regular commuters on the Hammersmith and City line. Even while writing this introduction, two consecutive terrorist attacks took place at mosques in the city of Christchurch, New Zealand, during the Friday prayer on March 15, 2019, killing fifty people and seriously injuring fifty more. The terrorist was a white supremacist ideologue from Australia motivated specifically by a worrying global ascendancy of anti-Muslim

hatred. He streamed his actual shooting on Facebook live, relaying the horror and carnage in real time. It marked the deadliest mass shooting in modern New Zealand history and the most merciless mass killing by a single perpetrator against Muslims in recent times. In many respects, Grenfell and Christchurch and innumerable tragic cases like it provoke many generic questions like: why do people suffer in horrendous ways? What purpose is served by instances of pain, suffering, and agony? Why do innocents like babies and children suffer? Why are acts that harm others allowed to occur? Why is there so much tragedy, sorrow, destruction, and distress in the world? In light particularly of the last question, one would be forgiven for concluding that the world is grim, brutal, hopeless, and full of *evil*.[1]

Yet, Muslims (as well as their faith neighbors Jews and Christians) believe with conviction that the world was created by a transcendent and personal Creator—God—who is absolutely powerful, has knowledge of all things, is fully Merciful, and is perfectly Just and Wise. Muslims also believe that the world and everything in it has been offered as an entrusted gift to us and that it is providentially guided by God for the specific ends and purposes He has determined. Muslims further believe that the evils of pain and suffering can be explicable, and intelligible to our minds and experience, and therefore not a reason to either doubt the existence of God or lack conviction in His specific attributes just mentioned. Are Muslims correct to believe that the world as it is and God so described are compatible? This question gets us to what has been called the 'problem of evil.' This book is an attempt to argue that the existence of evil is at least logically compatible with God as revealed in the Muslim sacred scripture of the Qur'an. The attempt is carried out bearing in mind that according to some observations, the project of theodicy may not have been a priority within Islamic theological discourse.[2]

In this book, I take theodicy as a worthy project of elaborate consideration. This means first and foremost I consider the problem of evil as a serious *theoretical* (intellectual) problem, acknowledging as well that there is an *experiential* (existential) component that has layers of complexity different in its severity and implications as well as a *practical* (functional) component that involves ways to eliminate what is identified as evil or bring about some desirable goal. Both these components are entirely different (and no less important) than a discursive engagement with theological and philosophical concepts that involve solving a logical problem. The experiential and practical dimensions of the problem of evil require a distinct and separate approach—one that I have not made the aim or focus of this book—and so for present purposes, I will not explore them

(though I have something to say about this in the conclusion). I have restricted my examination of the problem of evil to four major versions. They are: (1) the problem of why innocents suffer, particularly persons with disabilities, (2) the problem of animal pain and suffering, (3) the evolutionary problem of evil, and (4) the problem of hell. The approach I take in this book is to offer different ways Muslims might respond to these four formulations of the problem of evil using the resources of their own intellectual tradition in order to demonstrate the logical compatibility between the existence of evil and the core attributes of God. The methodology I employ is that of analytic theology where the tools of conceptual precision, argumentative rigor, logical coherence, and systematic reasoning borrowed from the storehouse of analytic philosophy define the style and communication of the content. This method is appropriate for a work that seeks to analyze concepts, claims, and arguments on a range of Islamic theological doctrines. Moreover, as a method, analytic theology has marked similarities with the medieval Muslim scholastic or rational theology called *kalam*, where definitions, fine distinctions, syllogisms, and dialectics defined the manner in which the discipline was presented and practiced. Before outlining the structure of the present book, let me first situate its significance and relevance within the field of Islamic theodicy.

Key Works on Theodicy

Watt, in an article nearly forty years ago, noted how, compared to Judaism and Christianity, early Sunni Muslims "paid little attention to the problem of theodicy," it being a project undertaken exclusively "among heretical Muslims" by which he was referring primarily to the Mu'tazilites.[3] It is inescapably obvious that in comparison to contemporary Christian and Jewish theological and philosophical works at least, the Islamic theodicy literature produced among academic writing in English is considerably less. In what follows, I briefly survey some of the key works on Islamic theodicy and then situate this book within the academic territory. I restrict my scope to only book-length treatments written in English that take evil and theodicy as an exclusive subject of enquiry. I am aware that there are other English works with sections or chapters that usefully analyze evil and theodicies. In addition, titles in Arabic, Farsi, and Turkish that address the topic have also been omitted from the review. My reason for doing this is that, first, space permits me only to be brief. Hence, I had to make a decision on selection and scope. Second, each book I survey here has contributed a substantively novel thesis or increased information on the overall understanding of the topic from the Islamic sources, and

third, this current book builds on the merits of these earlier works and explores avenues not directly addressed by them.

One of the first works to thoroughly examine theodicy is Ormsby's *Theodicy in Islamic Thought* where he undertakes a rigorous analysis of Arabic theological sources related to the controversy surrounding al-Ghazali's statement that the actual world is the best possible one. Ormsby unpacks the central claims underpinning its controversy and the constellation of secondary problems arising from it, setting out the core scholastic arguments and counterarguments. Particularly helpful is the analysis and presentation of the significance of God's omnipotence, divine wisdom and benevolence, and the metaphysical notions of possibility and necessity, and how ideas about them impacted and shaped the theological debate over a number of centuries subsequent to al-Ghazali. The book is filled with rich analysis and translations, making it indispensable as a reference for understanding the various reactions and embedded discussions and how Muslim scholars grappled with the perennial issues confronting any articulation of theodicies or indeed a doctrine of optimism from the dictum of one man. Ormsby's approach, although not analytic theology, is no doubt one of the earliest to give a systematic and methodical exposition of a theme very much different from the then prevailing method of historical analysis within Islamic Studies.

A decade and a half after Ormsby's publication, two important works were published related to evil: Heemskerk's *Suffering in Mu'tazilite Theology* and Inati's *The Problem of Evil*. To mention Heemskerk first, her monograph analyses the way the Basran Mu'tazilite theologian al-Qadi 'Abd al-Jabbar systematically gave an exposition of the etiology, function, and purpose of creaturely pain and suffering and how that fits into an overall divine eschatological compensatory scheme. Building her study on the extant editions of 'Abd al-Jabbar's *al-Mughni* as well as the works of his disciples Mankdim (d. 425/1034) and Ibn Mattawayh (d. 469/1076), Heemskerk meticulously examines the familiar ambit of related metaphysical issues over divine motivations, power, justice, goodness, and human freedom that had crystallized by the fourth H/tenth CE century from extended theological polemics. She then explores how 'Abd al-Jabbar attempts to reconcile these attributes with the existence of human and indeed animal pain and suffering within his account of divine imposition of creaturely responsibility (*taklif*). Although there is little by way of comparison with other theological schools, thinkers, and religious traditions or any novel venturing in interpretation, Heemskerk nevertheless offers a detailed exposition of 'Abd al-Jabbar's welfare-oriented account

of divine agency where a greater good (afterlife compensation) ultimately guides God's reason for permitting pain and suffering.

Inati's book presents a detailed analysis of the nature of evil, its types, etiology, and justification from specifically Ibn Sina's philosophical perspective. Inati constructs and then assesses the arguments and metaphysical commitments behind seven theses Ibn Sina proposes for the justification of evil in the world and how there is no incompatibility between God's goodness and power with such evils. Inati shows how instrumental Ibn Sina's thoughts on this topic are on later developments in both Muslim and Christian theological and philosophical thinking just like his own thinking was influenced by his Neoplatonic predecessors. The various 'Avicennan theodicies' and their effectiveness are thoroughly explained by Inati but argued by her to ultimately fail. Nevertheless, the presentation of Ibn Sina's material with close-text analysis is extremely useful, and the theodicy proposals offered by him constitute the core ones subsequently amplified by Islamic theologians and philosophers.

A decade later, Sherman Jackson published a seminal study called *Islam and the Problem of Black Suffering* that sought to situate black American existential concerns into dialogue with the intellectual resources of primarily premodern Sunni theology in order to explore whether these resources are robust enough to meaningfully offer solutions to the black experience—especially the reality around historical collective black pain and suffering raised by the controversial work of William R. Jones *Is God a White Racist?* written in the post–civil rights 1970s. Jackson offers a broad typology of major Muslim theological denominations and surveys the core postulates of each regarding divine omnipotence and benevolence followed by examining whether investing their intellectual capital into the problem of black suffering yields any fruitful deliberative gains. Although the overall answer is in the affirmative, it is nevertheless complicated and merely a human effort where theological arguments may not be enough. Jackson's scope and depth of analysis as well as the unique step in bringing a dialogical format to the field of study allows insights to be teased out from theologically opposing views. Jackson's lucid and in-depth presentation of the doctrines underpinning classical Muslim denominational theodicies for the black predicament is a helpful template for applications to other contexts and communities.

One final book to mention is Ozkan's *A Muslim Response to Evil*. Ozkan's book is in two parts: part one outlines the meaning of evil from the Qur'an, early mainstream Muslim theological accounts of it—especially key thinkers like Ibn Sina, Ibn Rushd, and al-Ghazali—summarizing

analyses from earlier books in the theodicy literature. Part two is a deeper dive into the thought of Said Nursi (d. 1960) related to the metaphysical nature of evil as well as its teleology. Ozkan presents a detailed overview of the intricate and often novel ideas developed by Nursi that demonstrates the eclectic and comprehensive approach he took in order to address the problem of evil beyond merely an abstract and theoretical reflection to one grounded in practical and moral engagement with it. Ozkan's treatment is wide in scope and allows for accessing a broad range of perspectives from within the Muslim theistic outlook and this makes it a helpful and convenient repository. However, this breadth also prevents any possibility for systematically assessing specific theodicies in order to bring out wider implications or make detailed comparisons with Nursi and other thinkers.

Cumulatively, all the above works offer valuable information and analysis on how the concept of evil was conceptualized by Muslim theologians and philosophers and how pain and suffering as phenomena were to be explained. They form a strong set of works, with divergent approaches, and constitute a core body of references in English on the topic. Each work has deepened the appreciation of specifically Islamic perspectives on evil, which is still very much absent from the general philosophy of religion literature. However, some areas were neither examined in detail nor addressed at all and it is these areas I particularly focus on in the current book. One area is that of a disability theodicy where I attempt to survey different ways disabilities have been explained from Muslim sources and offer a novel framework to instances of horrendous-difference disabilities and thereby allow a hitherto absent disability perspective into the conversation. Another area is that of animal pain and suffering. Although explored in a section by Heemskerk and briefly discussed by Ozkan, there is no detailed theological treatment that appropriates current philosophical and animal psychology literature that both surveys possible Islamic arguments and proposes independent tentative explorations. In addition, the strong trend toward a convergence of science and religion with particular interest in Darwinian evolution has meant God's agency and the theological issues like the problem of evil being reassessed and reexamined in light of categories defined by the biological sciences. What possible account of evil can be made on an evolutionary model of creation with specifically Islamic insights is a neglected area of exploration and so preliminary foray into such an account is attempted in this book. Finally, none of the reviewed works address one of the most difficult questions and that is the theodicy of hell.[4] This book will examine such a problem from an integrated account drawing on Islamic theological heritage and

the recent works in analytic theology. Thus, the current book is in a sense an extension of the body of existing Islamic theodicy works that hopes to bring new arguments, angles, explorations, and a missing approach to the mix—analytic theology.

Chapter Summaries

The structure of the book is as follows: in Chapter 1, I first outline the idea of evil generally and then specifically from the Qur'an. I then present a broad account of evil within the thought of Ibn Sina followed by a survey of four prominent conceptions of God within the formative period of Islamic theology and the understanding of good and evil that arises out of those respective conceptions. These will constitute the broad theological frameworks within which my own thinking, proposals, and analysis will operate. I thereafter sketch core aspects of what are called 'theodicies' and give a candidate list of the major ones articulated by medieval Islamic thinkers. I also briefly discuss the 'anti-theodicy position'—those who reject religious theodicies and the traditional formulations of the problem of evil.

In Chapter 2, I examine the first of the four versions of the problem of evil, which is the problem of why innocents suffer, taking my specific subgroup of innocents—those persons with disability. I focus on the problem of horrendous-difference disability. I attempt here to outline the etiology of disability according to Islamic primary sources of the Qur'an and Hadith and then propose a few theodicy models culminating in one specific model for those given life-debilitating impairments to defeat this challenge based on incorporating the Islamic concept of hospitality (*diyafa*) into the person with disability's cognitive outlook and subjective meaning-making process.

Chapters 3 and 4 are separate but also related chapters. Muslim scholars had discussed at length the nature, status, and destiny of nonhuman animals. This also meant they did not exclude discussions on the reasons why animals suffer and whether such suffering had an overall purpose. Chapter 3 thus examines the second of the four versions of the problem of evil, which is the problem of animal pain and suffering. I analyze possible animal theodicies and offer some novel speculative explanations of my own based on the theological ideas and precepts of some Muslim theologians. Chapter 4 introduces the third of the four versions of the problem of evil and that is the evolutionary problem of evil sometimes dubbed the 'Darwinian' problem. Hitherto unexplored within Islamic theology, I propose an Islamic evolutionary theodicy drawing on the works of some major contemporary theologians and philosophers as well as precepts and

precedence within the Qur'an and Muslim theology in order to construct possible reasons why God may allow such things as death, predation, and extinction in nature based on the evolutionary paradigm involving selection, adaptions, and accidents.

Chapter 5 assesses the fourth version of the problem of evil and that is the problem of hell. Here, a methodical and detailed analysis of the morally sufficient reasons why God would create hell and the overall validity of the retributive nature of its punishment will be tackled. Various positions in the Islamic theological literature will be examined that attempt to reconcile how what can be called the 'Mainstream View' of hell that upholds unending conscious torment of hell's inhabitants is compatible with the core attributes of God. The chapter will conclude with a short section on the soteriological problem of evil, namely, why God would allow some persons to suffer eternal punishment in hell for either never having heard the message of Islam or willfully rejecting it.

The concluding chapter discusses the findings and outlines of the book with suggestions for exploring a different avenue related to the topic of theodicy and evil that is either not addressed in this work or departs from its framework and methodology.

The different theodicies and defenses mentioned and discussed in this book are offered as responses to the various iterations of the problem of evil. They are meant to cumulatively offer theoretical explanations for why there might be pain, suffering, and other adverse states of affairs detrimental to the proper ways God Himself desires human and nonhuman living and flourishing to be but nevertheless is logically compatible with His core attributes. This, all the while acknowledging that "the Muslim theodicist has his task cut out for him"[5] because not only is there few rigorous contemporary Islamic philosophical and theological works (from which to draw intellectual stimulation and ideas) contributing to the plethora of religious voices on the issue but often the enterprise of theodicy itself is under attack for doing nothing to ameliorate evil and suffering.

There are some justifications I need to make regarding the style and form of this book. First, I have broadly attempted to adhere to gender-inclusive language but have clearly avoided it in the case of God, which I type with a capitalized 'G' and treat as a proper noun reflecting the original Arabic masculine. I have also avoided it for hadith where in most cases examples appear grammatically masculine in the Arabic but assume the feminine as well. This meant that I have not modified the English translation of the original Arabic with gender-neutral pronouns or terms. Second, I have omitted translating Arabic formulaic eulogies often found

after the name 'Allah,' the name of the Prophet Muhammad, his family members, companions, or any scholarly figure. This decision is more to allow for a steady and unbroken rhythm of reading than any disagreement with eulogies as a practice. Third, in some chapters, the material is undertaken with formal analysis that is then presented in logical form. This is to allow the reader to see an argument of a particular author or my own arguments in a series of steps. Because of the technical nature of the subject and the methodology adopted for the book, these logical forms are inevitable and arguably an important feature of grasping the specific claims within the arguments. Ordering claims into premises that constitute an overall argument is an effective way to visually trace the movement and pattern of the core reasoning. However, I have attempted to keep the logical machinery to a minimum so that there is no impression of unnecessary obfuscation often leveled at works of analytic theology. Fourth, a point on references. The problem of evil is a topic with a vast written literature produced within Anglo-American philosophy of religion and this 'plagues' the author (in a manner of speaking) with choice. What I have endeavored to do is reference those works that are collative or summative in nature, meaning they contain other studies that the reader can consult, saving me the need to make extensive citation of references. Where I do make extensive citations, it is mainly due to my reliance on such works for an argument, a particular angle on some issue, or it being important I feel for the reader to understand and explore.

All translations in this book are mine unless otherwise stated and acknowledged.

1

The Problem of Evil: Outlines

In this chapter, I outline a number of issues related to the study of theodicy. First, I summarize the current state of the problem of evil within the analytic philosophy of religion. This is followed by examination of the concept of evil in the Qur'an, the thought of Ibn Sina, and major theological denominations in the formative development of Islam. I then conclude with a survey of key areas that link to the topic of theodicy such as its definition, core questions, criteria, types, and detractors.

The Current Situation

The problem of evil *broadly* conceived is the challenge of attempting to reconcile the existence of evil and imperfection in the world with commitment to the positive existence of justice, goodness, and harmony. In its *narrow* (theistic) conception, it is more specifically the problem of reconciling the existence of an absolutely perfect being with the evil of sin and suffering.[1] The brief outline I give here in this section is that of the contemporary treatment within the tradition of analytic (Anglo-American) philosophy of religion because it has defined much of the scope and parameters of how this problem is understood and addressed by current theologians and philosophers across the three theistic traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The standard approach of the analytic tradition is as follows:[2] God is conceived in a particular way, namely that He is one and exists uniquely. This God is a personal being and must be characterized as the proper object of religious worship. The grounding for this proper religious worship is God's perfection, where perfection is conceptualized as maximal greatness: a being than which there is no possible greater one. This bare or minimal conception of divinity constitutes a common departure point for all the Abrahamic theistic traditions and

is often referred to as "perfect being theology."[3] From the idea of God's maximal greatness, a set of necessary core or essential attributes are deduced that are constitutive of God's nature because such attributes are great-making properties and, combined, would entail there is no other type of being greater. These great-making properties or essential attributes of God (which He would have to a maximal degree) include:

1. Omnipotence: the power to bring about any state of affairs that is logically possible.
2. Omniscience: knowing everything that is logically possible to know.
3. Perfect goodness: the supreme source of morality and what is good.
4. Aseity: ontologically independent, self-subsistent, and sovereign over everything.
5. Incorporeality: possesses no body or finite dimensions.
6. Eternity: is either timeless or everlasting.
7. Omnipresence: wholly present in all space–time.
8. Perfect freedom: nothing external to God determines His actions.

This conceptualization of God (call it 'standard theism,' or *ST* for short) is then challenged by bringing it into conflict with certain formulations of or ideas about evil. This is done in order to cast doubt over God as a perfect being. However, as we will see in the subsequent chapters, it is primarily 1 and 3 from the attribute list above that were the sites of contention most heavily played out within Islamic theology.

A distinction is commonly made between, on the one hand, evil in relation to God as an *experiential* problem and, on the other, its relation to God as a *theoretical* problem. The former problem generally concerns itself with how individuals face personal and practical difficulties in knowing and experiencing suffering or are victims of events and acts of evil. It may also involve the practical modalities of combating and eliminating injustice and evil from society. On a specific level, the experiential problem may relate to personal crises of faith in religious adherents in how evil becomes a factor that undermines love, confidence, and trust in God because of one's inability to process and compute the complexity and disturbing effects it generates. This category of the problem is often excluded by philosophers who see it more as the domain of work reserved for religious leaders, social workers, and health professionals.

The latter problem by contrast is a purely discursive and intellectual engagement that examines the impact the existence of evil may have on the truth-value or epistemic validity of God on *ST*. This theoretical problem of evil is generally subdivided into two types: (1) the logical problem,

also labeled as the *deductive* problem, and (2) the evidential problem, also labeled as the *inductive* problem. Trakakis explains the difference:

> The logical problem consists in removing an alleged logical inconsistency between certain claims made by *ST* and certain claims made about evil (e.g., that the existence of the God of *ST* is logically incompatible with the existence of certain kinds of evil). The evidential problem, on the other hand, takes it as given that the question of logical consistency has been or can be settled, and focuses instead on relations of evidential support, probability, and plausibility: the question here is whether the existence of evil, although logically consistent with the existence of God, counts against the truth of *ST* insofar as evil lowers the probability that *ST* is true.[4]

Philosophers like J. L. Mackie[5] and H. J. McCloskey[6] set out formal arguments attempting to demonstrate the logical incompatibility between God and evil, meaning neither can coexist, but it is generally held by contemporary philosophers that this attempt was unsuccessful and that there is a plausible internal consistency between *ST* and formulations of evil. A pivotal point that marked the transition from the logical to the evidential problem was the seminal paper written by atheist philosopher William Rowe published in 1979[7] that advanced an "intuitively appealing argument" that was "crucially predicated on the inductive step that, given the countless instances of apparently pointless suffering found in the world, it is highly likely that at least some of these are in fact instances of pointless suffering."[8] Theistic responses to this evidential problem consisted of two maneuvers. The first maneuver was to construct theodicies and the second was to retreat into a view known as *skeptical theism*.[9] Theodicies involve vindicating God's justice and goodness by offering plausible reasons or justifications of why God allows evil in the world. Skeptical theism is the view that "the limitations of the human mind are such that we are in no position to be able to discern God's reasons for permitting evil—and hence, the fact that we cannot identify such reasons should not surprise us and should not count against the truth of *ST*."[10] Both maneuvers characterize the current state of play within the philosophical literature on the problem of evil, and the disagreement among philosophers of religion has assumed a hardened and entrenched form with little possibility of moving beyond mere adaptations, nuanced reformulations, and reiterations of already existing arguments, although recently there has been a move toward a more imaginative and innovative redirection of the problem with a whole new set of parameters and presuppositions guiding the discussions.[11] I have

tried to appropriate to some degree these imaginative insights in this book that also build on from earlier works in theodicy within Islamic studies.

Evil in Islamic Theology and Philosophy

This section will situate the term 'evil' and its related topics specifically within the Islamic context. First, the concept will be presented generally, then as it occurs in the Qur'an before sketching Ibn Sina's view because it encapsulates much of the direction and thinking of theologians who came after him. Thereafter, a summary of the main theological contours of God and evil as expounded in the major Muslim theological schools will be given.

There is clearly a reality to evil. Despite knowing, experiencing, and recognizing its reality, the word is notoriously difficult to define with any precision. There is no single statement or meaning that captures the entire range of uses and cases and no description that reflects all its complexities. Muslim theologians did not offer technical definitions for evil but gave extended lists of examples that included broad notions like maleficent acts, pain, and suffering. Evil used in this sense will be generally intended throughout the book.[12] In addition, the standard classification of evil into *moral* and *natural* will be assumed as they are reflected in the Islamic theological and philosophical literature. The former type of evil is that which results from the actions of a person held to be morally accountable or blameworthy that harm others and oneself such as acts of terror and torture or defects in one's character like dishonesty and vanity, whereas the latter type does not relate to moral agents but naturally occurring events or disasters like floods, hurricanes, illnesses, diseases, and disabilities that are not due to the choices and actions of a moral agent. What both types have in common is that their token instances bring about suffering, harm, or adverse states of affairs in creatures.[13]

Turning to the Qur'an, the key Qur'anic passages that give us an idea of the core notion of evil within Islamic belief include: (1) al-Baqara, verses 30–34: creation of Adam and Iblis's refusal to obey God's command to prostrate; (2) al-Hijr, verses 32–42: Iblis's recalcitrance manifested in his arrogant disobedience of God's command to prostrate before Adam. He is then pronounced accursed but is granted powers by God to misguide humanity; (3) al-Baqara verse 36: Adam and Hawwa disobey God's command not to approach the tree. The Qur'an thus offers a prehumanity historical account that indicates a few things for us about the nature and etiology of evil including:

1. Evil is not a directly created entity by God but a secondary outcome from the free agency of Iblis and subsequently post-Adam—humanity in general.
2. Evil is not destroyed by God (as Iblis is allowed to persist) but is integrated into His total providential plan and governance of the world.
3. Evil is caused by a metaphysical agent like Iblis.
4. Evil is caused by the exercise of free will or choice.
5. Evil's purpose is to test humanity—whether they will obey God and be faithful to His commandments and covenant (*mithaq*) or follow Iblis and his cohorts.
6. Evil is suggested to be whatever is contrary to the Divine will and command.[14]

Ozkan has extensively surveyed the semantic field of the Qur'anic term "sharr" from the root *sh / r / r /*—often translated into English as 'evil'—and has shown the diverse contextual range of meanings. Her list includes the following:[15]

1. Parsimony (*bukhl*): withholding in miserly fashion from God's bounty and gifts as an evil.
2. Going astray (*dalal*): to veer away from God's path.
3. Rejection of God (*kufr*): disbelief in God and His revelation.
4. Idolatry (*shirk*): associating deities and partners with God in His divinity.
5. Violation of a covenant or treaty where a promise is made but then betrayed.
6. Turning away from God (*i'rad*): having an aversion to what God institutes and commands.
7. Slander (*ifk*): spreading malicious rumours.
8. Transgression (*tughyan*): exceeding all bounds and limits in iniquity, wickedness, arrogance and aggression.
9. Trials and tests with evil.
10. The situation in hell.
11. Satan/evil inclinations.

Ozkan concludes that there is no singular portrayal of evil in the Qur'an because it occurs in a plurality of contexts. Also, there is no ontologically precise category for evil in the Qur'an and so she argues that it seems more abstract like a *relation* as in a relation of loss, for example, especially in human actions and situations rather than an actual and

separate existence of some entity.[16] This account of evil in the Qur'an is somewhat different from that generally articulated by Muslim philosophers who no doubt inspired by the Qur'anic insights adopted a stronger metaphysical framework to explain the etiology and ontology of evil. One of the most influential philosophers of the medieval period to do this was Abu 'Ali b. al-Husayn Ibn Sina (d. 428/1027).[17] He discussed at length the notion of evil under the doctrine of divine providence (*'inaya*; *tadbir*).[18] He believed evil was willed by God insofar as it is a corollary of what He creates. If God knows and wills everything that He creates, and if evil is something encountered in the created order, then it must follow that evil is known, willed, and created by God. But Ibn Sina, in agreement with his Neoplatonist predecessors, states that the existence of evil is not a positive existence but a negative one—a privation (*'adam*)—meaning it is an absence of or lack of some perfection in something that occasionally arises rather than a recurrent and fixed substantive reality. In other words, evil is accidental, which would mean God's creation of evil is accidental. This is not to say as McGinnis explains that not just any privation or absence is an evil, but only a privation of some perfection required by the nature of the thing, where the perfections in question are grounded in the very species and nature of the thing. Thus, there is nothing evil about the fact that a rock cannot see. Only in something of which sight is one of the perfections and goods of that kind of thing is the absence of sight and blindness an evil.[19]

For Ibn Sina, evil occurs as a reality ultimately because of matter. The physical world is one that is characterized by change (generation and corruption) and that entails it is susceptible of privation. When matter is not compliant with how it is to be shaped or pressed into receiving form, this shortcoming is what gives rise to evil. Matter is unavoidably evil because it is by its nature always characterized by potentiality.[20] To give an analogy as mentioned by Seeskin, if God is like a surgeon, then the "essence of what the surgeon does is to heal," but in order for the surgeon to "accomplish this end, the surgeon must cut into the body and produce pain." It is arguable that the surgeon is responsible for the pain but it is "accidental to her mission or what we might call her primary intention." Similarly, God is responsible for privation but "only as a concomitant factor of creation."[21]

Regarding naturally occurring evils (nonmoral or 'surd' evils), Ibn Sina, being a Neoplatonist, argues that God creates good for its own sake because He is the Ultimate Good. Because He is pure good and pure perfection, all things desire God and are themselves perfected insofar as they seek their fulfilment in Him. Through an emanative process, God creates

good from His own essence. Evil, however, is an accidental creation as mentioned but has a sort of existence in relative terms. What this means is that when things occur in nature, they create certain effects. A person *S* judges these effects relative to how *S* perceives them to be, which is either harmful, adverse, or negative (–), or beneficial, favorable, or positive (+). But when some naturally occurring object or event *x* is "considered merely in itself or essentially as the kind of thing that it is, then its performing the functions characteristic of its kind is a good or perfection of *x*." If, for example, fire burns or when rain falls and puts a fire out, they are being a good instance of their kind, and "that things should be good instances of their kinds in fact contributes to the order of the good. Therefore, natural things considered in themselves or essentially are not evil but good." However, if *x* is judged by *S* to prevent some other object *y* from obtaining some good or *x* appears to remove some good from *y*, then *x* is considered an evil relative to or accidentally to *y*. Thus,

> when someone is burned by a fire, the fire is perceived as a cause of evil relative to the one burned, for certainly if that same person were freezing the fire would be perceived as a good. Conversely, if rain were to prevent a freezing person from starting a fire, the impediment to and absence of the fire would be perceived as an evil.[22]

In other words, "inasmuch as *x* is considered relative to *y*, and relations are accidental, *x*'s being a cause of some evil for *y* is accidental." What Ibn Sina wants to argue is that the natural order and its constituents are not essentially a cause of evil or an evil cause. "Considered in themselves and essentially, they are all good" because natural evil resulting from external causes "is an accidental consequence of natural things performing their necessary and proper activities."[23] Therefore, evil cannot per se be attributed to God's creative activity but only as a necessary consequence of creating good.

On moral evil, Ibn Sina states very little. He does uphold that acts done by individuals that bring about harm or bad are based on choices. These choices are brought about by the individual thinking that the act possesses a good that is expected to result from it. These faulty judgments— in reality *ignorance*—about what are expected goods in actions arise when the soul is unable to resist matter, giving in to its inclinations and desires. Thus, it is only when the soul is separated from the trappings of matter that it can free itself from ignorance and thus become moral.[24]

Given the above account, Ibn Sina addresses the problem of why there is evil in the world in several ways as Inati has discussed and they are:

1. evil does not have positive existence,
2. evil is part of the providential ordering of creation,
3. good outweighs evil,
4. evil is inevitable and unavoidable as it is a consequence of there being good,
5. evil is a necessary means for realising good,
6. evil is a necessary part of creation, and
7. evil is caused by free will.[25]

These various solutions also capture the broad range of approaches taken by Muslim theologians before and after Ibn Sina although he systematically presented it within a specific metaphysical framework. Thus, his theodicies deliver a broad and effective package of understanding and explaining evil and suffering that can be employed and elaborated for further theodicies or defenses.

Mainstream Theological Perspectives

In this remaining part of the section, I will merely outline the core doctrines underpinning the ideas about evil and God's essential attributes as conceptualized and articulated within the major theological schools that emerged within the formative period of Islam restricting the scope to the Mu'tazilites, Ash'arites, Maturidites, and Traditionalists. I avoid here a historical analysis of the development of these schools, which have been extensively done by others,[26] and so the account is minimalistic, not going beyond the relevant points related to the issue.[27]

The Mu'tazilites:[28] Generally, primacy was given by this group to God's justice (*'adl*) and benevolence, which is the principal attribute by which all other aspects of God had to be reconciled—especially His motives and actions. God's justice and benevolence meant human beings possessed libertarian free will in order to undertake genuine moral choices and thus be causal agents of evil because if God is the direct cause of actions, He would also be the cause of evil actions and that would compromise His goodness and transcendence. It would also mean He would hold humans accountable for acts that He has effectively determined—something they believed was palpably unjust and obviated human responsibility. God in this way was exonerated from either causing or cooperating with evil. God's justice and benevolence also entailed that God's actions are welfare oriented, meaning God was obligated to maintain whatever is optimal (*aslah*) for all creatures. This further entailed that God cannot act arbitrarily but is morally bound to guide His actions so that it averts harm or secures tangible goods for creatures. These moral goods that guide divine

actions are independent of Him and hence amenable to human reason and were the means by which humans could come to recognize God as just. God and humans both, therefore, are governed by the same moral paradigms. In addition, this notion of the optimal would further entail God was obligated to create the best possible world because anything less would be to act contrary to what is optimal. All this, therefore, allowed the enterprise of theodicy as viable because God's actions were now scrutable and so various explanations could be sought justifying them. The problem of evil and suffering on the Mu'tazilite account would primarily be explained due to human free actions, and God's permission of it would mean He would be duty-bound to recompense that with something equal or greater in goodness and pleasure—especially in the Hereafter.

The Ash'arites:[29] Broadly, on this theological orientation, divine will and power were attributes prominently situated into the center of what essentially defined and characterized God's activity. There are no values, principles, or norms that are independent of His self-determined dictates. Any move to constrain God's activity with His benevolence, Ash'arites argued, is entirely misplaced. God is under no obligation to direct any act or create anything based on promoting human welfare; *that* He does is purely from a contingent act of benevolence. God's power and prerogatives are unbounded and so everything is subordinated to them. Ultimately, God's will, sovereignty, and autonomy determine everything in creation—including human actions and history. Humans have a slender margin of involvement in performing their actions. Only the will directed at performing some action is properly attributable to humans and the remaining requirements to execute the act like capacity, connectivity between will and act, and any other necessary circumstance are all enacted by God and acquired by (*kasb*) humans. This high providence and strong determinism also meant evil was created by God. However, because evil on this view has no objective existence but is relative to the subjective experience and judgments of individuals, it meant that God could not be attributed with evil acts or wrongful acts per se because there is no ontologically independent reality that is evil. Moreover, God is not obligated to recompense or balance any affliction of harm, injustice, or adverse states of affairs that He causes with some equal or greater reward because there is no moral index that checks God's motives or actions. Thus, any temporal or human categories of judgments are not applicable to God. Put another way, God has no duties to anything in a kingdom He is sovereign over. In fact, God is the very source of moral duties in that they are grounded in His issued commandments recorded in scripture. It would further follow on this view that instances of suffering in the world

are not really amenable to explication simply because divine motives and actions are not grounded in any overarching goals or purposes. Searching for explanations then is ultimately futile, which would make the project of theodicy pointless. Their stance is an anti-theodicy one. However, for Ash'arites, the existence of or the fact of evil does not translate as God's approval of evil: only that its existence cannot be beyond His will and control.

The Maturidites:[30] There is considerable overlap in this theological school with the account of Ash'arism just given, although there are some significant and nuanced differences. One difference, for example, is that although Maturidites would sympathetically share the commitments, motives, and reasoning that underpin the Ash'arite arguments for divine power, sovereignty, and human finitude, they would situate at the forefront of their theology God's absolute wisdom (*hikma*). This attribute can constrain God's omnipotence although how exactly the relation between both attributes plays out is not always clear. One thing that is clear is that God's actions are guided by wisdom and so there are no pointless or aimless divine acts. Wisdom is generally defined as acts that are either commensurate with their rightful purpose or that which promote beneficial and praiseworthy results. This consequentialist consideration, however, is also—paradoxically—inscrutable because although God must act based on wisdom, the precise substance of this wisdom is nevertheless unknowable. Another difference with Ash'arism (and indeed Mu'tazilism) is that God, on Maturidism, can commit evil. God can bring about, cause, sponsor, and cooperate in evil. Thus, causing suffering, harm, or adverse states of affairs in the world does not compromise His goodness and justice. However, God does not do these actions arbitrarily because that would not appear to serve any wise purposes and it is impossible for God to act gratuitously (*'abath*). This suggests that if evil or suffering did serve wise purposes, then God could permit them. Here, the general Maturidite account of evil clarifies this doctrine, namely, that evil is always proximate and never ultimate. In other words, God's actions in the end cannot be evil even though immediate human experience may judge something adversely. Evil then is teleological. On the Maturidite view, evil, bad states of affairs, suffering, and hardship have instrumental value in that they serve a number of ends like enabling spiritual growth or exemplifying God's great attributes. The ends serving evils are directed by God's wise purposes and, although may not necessarily materialize in the fullness of a patient's life, nevertheless will reveal itself within a greater teleological scheme.

The Traditionalists:[31] Although often positioned antithetically to the

more overt rationalist orientation of Muslim theological groups like the three just surveyed, Traditionalist theology in some respects has considerable overlaps with them. God, for example, is held to have complete sovereignty over human agency, nature, and history but not everything that is constituted by God's ontological decree or will is reduced to God's deontological decree or will: God decreeing x does not mean God approves of x. The complete extension of God's power over human acts nevertheless does not negate meaningful moral agency because of the psychological event of choice (*ikhtiyar*). This means that the etiology of moral evil is ultimately traced to the human self (*nafs*) and Satan, and not God. In this way, divine cooperation in evil is avoided while preserving omnipotence. The way omnibenevolence is upheld is that God by definition cannot enact pure evil (*sharr mahd*) because it has no ontology. Only relative or proximate (*idafi*) evil exists and that too because human subjective evaluations judge something as such based on contextual factors like time, place, and circumstances. The proximate evils that God permits are guided by His infinite wisdom, mercy, and goodness: an axiological matrix that governs divine choices and decisions in order to realize some greater good. This welfare-oriented motive guiding divine actions is a defining feature of God's relation with His creation. A qualification, however, is that God not only acts with consideration of creaturely welfare but acts based on self-vindication and self-consideration because wisdom entails that an actor acts in her own interests as well. God acting based on self-consideration amounts to ensuring He is adequately and properly worshipped as that generates His approval and pleasure. Evil on this view is also teleological and not gratuitous. The existence of suffering serves a wise purpose, which is educative such as awakening humans from ignorant slumber and heedlessness of God to a reorientation toward Him.

From the above theological schools and their core postulates, several points about evil can be inferred, which include:

1. Evil is part of God's creation.
2. Evil is neither desired nor approved by God.
3. Evil is a privation.
4. Evil has a reality.
5. There is no absolute evil only relative evil.
6. A minor evil can avert a greater evil.

Given Ibn Sina's account of evil as well as that of the mainstream theological groups, we can set out a preliminary list of identifiable theodicies found in the works of both. These will recur in the subsequent chapters in

various forms, details, and iterations. Some of these theodicies no doubt overlap, whereas others do not and, in fact, may not even be fully consistent when in conjunction with each other. The theodicy list then includes:

1. There would be no (appreciation of) good without evil.[32]
2. Evil is caused by human free choices.[33]
3. The actual world is the best possible world.[34]
4. Evil is necessary.[35]
5. Evil is a privation and hence has no actual being/existence.
6. Ultimately, there is no evil because what is thought to be evil is in the end disguised goods.[36]
7. Reward in the afterlife outweighs earthly pain and suffering.[37]
8. Evil is a means to a greater good.

It remains to look at what exactly the concept of a theodicy is. To this I now turn to the final section of this chapter.

Examining Theodicy

Theodicy, in general terms, refers to the attempt to explain evil in the world.[38] These explanations may vary in sophistication and detail but they all have the same basic objective, which is to reconcile justice and goodness with the ubiquitous reality of evil, injustice, pain, and suffering. The term 'theodicy' itself is a neologism, being a combination of two Greek nouns θεός (God) and δίκη (justice). G. W. Leibniz in the eighteenth century transliterated them into the French word *théodicée* in his book on the subject *Essais de Théodicée sur la bonté de Dieu, la liberté de l'homme et l'origine du mal*. This definition has retained its original sense of the vindication of divine justice, as illustrated by Immanuel Kant's explanation where he writes, "by 'theodicy' we understand the defence of the highest wisdom of the creator against the charge which reason brings against it for whatever is counterpurposive (*das Zweckwidrige*) in the world."[39] Theodicy, in the narrow, technical, and theistic sense, "explores logical strategies to vindicate God from moral culpability for evil." In short, "theodicy seeks to 'justify the ways of God to men.' It does not simply refute the accusation of injustice; it demonstrates God's justice."[40] Metaphysician Peter van Inwagen summarizes the point as follows: "a theodicy is not simply an attempt to meet the charge that God's ways are unjust: it is an attempt to exhibit the justice of his ways."[41]

Some philosophers differentiate theodicy from what is called a 'defense.' One way of demarcating this difference is to say that in a theodicy, the theodicist makes the strong claim of knowing God's actual reasons for

allowing evil, whereas the proponent of a defense argues with a weaker and more cautious claim that for all we know, a particular explanation *could be* (might possibly be) the reason why God permits evil and that possibility is sufficient for establishing the compatibility between divine goodness and justice with varieties of evil. Another way of demarcating the theodicy–defense difference is by highlighting the aims of each. On a theodicy, the theodicist seeks to argue how theism makes plausible sense of evil and suffering by demonstrating how God's actions based on His power, knowledge, wisdom, mercy, and love to permit evil are fully justi-fied, whereas a defense seeks to show how evidentialist arguments against God on the basis of evil are unsuccessful in undermining belief in theism. Meister and Taliaferro explain the difference like this:

> A *defence* can be used in two different ways: first, when deployed as a re-sponse to the logical problem of evil, in which it is argued that there is a logical inconsistency between certain claims about God and evil, it at-tempts to establish that it is rational to believe that God exists; and second, when it is deployed as a response to the probabilistic or evidential problem of evil, in which it is argued that it is implausible to believe certain claims about God and evil, it attempts to establish that the existence of evil does not make it improbable that God exists. With a *theodicy*, the objective is to demonstrate that it is reasonable to believe that God exists and, while not typically attempting to account for every evil, to offer an overarching structure in which to make sense of evil in the world as an aspect of an overall good.[42]

Theodicy as an overarching approach relates religious/theological and philosophical questions about evil in order to present a framework or applicable model to explain how evil is compatible with God. These core questions of theodicy are as follows:

1. Origin of evil: How does evil originate? Who is responsible?
2. Nature of evil: What is the ontology of evil? How does it exist?
3. Problem of evil: How does evil pose a problem for theology?
4. Reason for evil: Why does God permit evil? What is the morally suf-ficient reason?
5. End of evil: How will God end evil and/or ultimately bring good out of evil?[43]

A theodicy does not have to address each question in a sequential or methodical way (religious texts like the Qur'an, for example, do not do

so but nevertheless suggest answers to these questions) nor even in a definitive way, but a robust theodicy would nevertheless effectively address these core questions.

A further issue of theodicy is determining what exact or clear criterion establishes a valid and robust model that accounts for the compatibility of evil with God and the vindication of His goodness and justice. Here, I adapt the five-point criteria offered by Scott for a criterion for Islamic theodicies:[44]

1. Fidelity: is the theodicy grounded in the appropriate sources of theology, like the Qur'an, Hadith, and early authoritative theological tradition?
2. Coherence: is the theodicy logical and internally consistent with other core and definitive and fundamental Islamic doctrines?
3. Relevance: does the theodicy meaningfully address, connect, and relate to contemporary experiences of evil?
4. Creativity: Does the theodicy imaginatively and innovatively engage the problem of evil?
5. Humility: Does the theodicy recognize its inherent limits and scope?

Any theodicy constructed from the Islamic tradition must first and foremost be congruent with its own sources and consistent with it and its set of foundational doctrines and claims. Establishing this, a theodicy ought then to be assessed for its degree of usefulness in addressing the issue at hand followed by how interpretively imaginative and innovative it is (although constrained somewhat by what the theological sources may possibly allow). Finally, the theodicy must be modest about the extent to which it can address or apply to its case(s).

A relatively new contender in Anglo-American discussions on the problem of evil is a position called 'anti-theodicy.' Although anti-theodical views are not merely a product of recent decades, there are novel aspects that have defined it to be a specific posturing regarding the entire theodicy endeavor and enterprise. As Trakakis notes, anti-theodicy is not a uniform doctrine nor is it driven by an identical set of attitudes. Nonetheless, there are identifiable themes that consist of a spectrum of engagements from critical disdain to constructive skepticism.[45] The core overlapping objections constituting the anti-theodicy position are:

1. Moral insensitivity: theodicies do not take suffering seriously because they make an equivalence between all types of evils. Horrendous evils on a mass scale (like genocide) and a personal tribulation (like an

accident), for example, are explained in exactly the same way by appeal to some greater good, which abandons any distinction in degree, quantity, and severity of an evil like suffering.

2. Moral blindness: theodicies often are formulated in such a way as to occlude the radically cruel and merciless nature of evil—even unconscionable evil.

3. Licenses evil: theodicies license evil because by explaining them away, justifying them, or ameliorating them removes any or at least weakens moral responsiveness. The status quo therefore remains unchanged and so evil is allowed to persist in existence and process.

4. Impersonal: theodicies involve a detached logical approach when making moral assessments and calculations. The analysis of evil within theodicies is expressed in a formal manner, removed from a subjective appreciation or engagement of its severity and impact.

5. Dysfunctionality: theodicies do not understand how morality works because the logic governing the explanatory basis for evil reduces to excessive utilitarian considerations like outweighing factors rather than the victims.

6. Instrumentalization: theodicies make people means to an end rather than significant ends in themselves because evil is explained in teleological terms. Theodicies seem only to work effectively if humans are utilized as a tool for a calculated end.[46]

Anti-theodicy in the Islamic theological context refers to the rejection of offering theodicies because God is entirely different from creaturely predilection and fathomability. In fact, on this view—espoused mainly by the Ash'arites and Zahirites[47]—it would be religiously inappropriate—indeed improper—to seek ultimate explanations and reasons because this would be delving into divine motives, which is inscrutable to human understanding, and involves questioning those motives, which humans have no right to do. A few philosophical arguments were given by Muslim anti-theodicists to reject seeking explanations and justifiable reasons why God might permit evil:

1. A cause cannot ground divine actions because causes are temporal and originated events. Temporal and originated events have prior causes, whereby each cause has a prior cause ad infinitum. Thus, "if God acted on account of a cause or wise purpose, this would entail an endless chain or infinite regress (*tasalsul*) of causes, which the Ash'arites deem impossible."[48]

2. Positing a cause that guides or grounds God's actions implies a lack of

need. If God is sovereign, unbounded in His prerogative, unrestrained in the exercise of His will, and is absolutely powerful, He cannot require causes because acting due to a specific cause will mean He be perfected by it, "because if the occurrence of the cause were not better than its nonexistence, it would not be a cause. One who is perfected by another is imperfect in himself. This is impossible for God."[49]

3. God's commandments ground morality. They are not grounded in any standard external to Himself. If this is the case, then it implies that morality that is constructed by human beings based on subjective formulations is inapplicable to God because He is above any such standards—He *is* the standard.[50]

4. There are no divine obligations so nothing can impose itself on God such that failing to do it, He would be responsible for a fault, wrong, or blame. Such categories cannot apply to God as He owes nothing to anything in what is His creation and kingdom.

5. Explanations for why evils occur only arise if one believes God is motivated to act for what brings about the optimal benefit or good for creatures in any given instance or scenario. Hence, only if one assumes that God is akin to an act-utilitarian being is a theodicy necessary but not if God is a voluntary agent.[51]

The attitude and reasoning of the Muslim anti-theodicist view are starkly captured by the medieval Andalusian exegete and jurist Abu Bakr Ibn al-'Arabi (d. 543/1148):

If it is asked how God can punish creatures without any of them committing any sin or chastise them based on what He had intended for them or had written and determined for them, we will reply by saying what is to prevent Him from doing that—whether rationally or according to the law? If they reply to that by stating the most merciful and wise would not act in such a way, we will reply to that as follows: above is one who commands him and prohibits him. Our Lord may not be questioned about what He does; rather it is *they* who are questioned. It is not permitted to analogise the creation with the Creator nor is it allowed to judge the Creator's actions according to the actions of His creatures. In reality, all actions belong to God and His creation belong to Him; thus, He can do with them as He pleases; judge between them how He sees fit (author's emphasis).[52]

Conclusion

Muslim thinkers engaged deeply with the question of how to meaningfully situate the existence of evil in a world they believed was created

for the benefit of human beings. The additional problem they grappled with was how the various token instances of evil like pain, suffering, and horrendous states of affairs are consistent with God's attributes of mercy, compassion, wisdom, and justice. Although many theologians were skeptical of the whole enterprise of theodicy, others did offer explanations—often elaborate and detailed. The remaining chapters will explore some of these elaborate and detailed theodicies.

2

Disability, Suffering, and Four Theodicies

In this chapter, I will examine four theodicies traceable within the Islamic primary sources of the Qur'an and Hadith that offer possible explanations why it is that God permits persons to suffer disabilities of various types. This will be followed by a general critique of their effectiveness from other critical and disability perspectives, with less emphasis on the formal theological and philosophical underpinnings that in large part drive the discussion. In this way, the analysis is guided more by the contents of the Islamic source texts and not analytic theological speculation. This means that the various theological frameworks that preoccupied the discussions in Chapter 1 are not specifically applied here for addressing the present issue. Although it is arguable that the Qur'an and Hadith may contain other possible explanatory models for why some people suffer disabilities (like a free will theodicy or a communion theodicy), I have restricted myself to only four that I feel are prominent but often overlooked. The four theodicies I will briefly examine include:

1. Retribution theodicy
2. Therapeutic theodicy
3. Greater-Good theodicy
4. Educative theodicy

I will then elaborate on the fourth theodicy, offering a version that attempts to afford a way to defeat ostensibly destructive forms of disability drawing on the Islamic virtue of hospitality or *diyafa*.

Preliminaries

I feel a preliminary observation is necessary before I proceed, which relates to the state of study regarding disability and Islamic (philosophical) theology, law, and spirituality. Much like the attitude toward persons with disability, the Islamic academic cosmos has situated disability studies on the peripheral orbit.[1] This is a mistaken positioning. The current engagement of Euro-American Islamic studies with the field of disability studies is tentative and marginal. At present, other than a few academic monograph-length treatments and a finite set of book chapters or journal articles (some of which are cited in this chapter) little substantial development seems forthcoming.[2] If this is the forecast trend, then it is a costly oversight for a number of reasons. I will briefly mention only three. First, many Muslims have disabilities and many Muslim academics and religious scholars are persons with disabilities and so there is a fact of disabled experience that needs room to work out thinking on Islam from a disability perspective, which will inevitably involve new and divergent methodological and hermeneutical considerations from the inherited premodern interpretive traditions and their corpus. Second, the rich and diverse Islamic scriptural and intellectual resources (historical and current) can bring into conversation precepts, ideas, and arguments that can be utilized in interrogating and contesting the philosophical and anthropological assumptions grounding the field of current Western disability studies concepts and activist practice and propose instead alternative perspectives for consideration. This will not only erect a dialogue between contrasting assessments of what disability is and its related areas of inquiry but also offer an Islamic critical lens that will no doubt enrich disability scholarship. Last, and perhaps more fundamentally, the Qur'an itself thrusts disability into the center frame of the Islamic message—most explicitly in the account of the blind man (*a'ma*) whom the Prophet Muhammad "frowned" and "turned away" from due to annoyance on being interrupted in conversation. The entire 80th chapter of the Qur'an was pointedly named after that incident as "'Abasa" ("He Frowned"). The unnamed blind person in the Qur'anic chapter is identified as 'Abd Allah ibn Umm Maktum who sincerely and eagerly approached the Prophet seeking religious instruction and learning but was ignored as the Prophet was preoccupied with addressing Islam to a hardened and powerful elite group of Meccans. As a result, a "deft and pithy set of verses" were revealed to the Prophet for failing to give proper attention to 'Abd Allah ibn Umm Maktum—something the Prophet subsequently regretted his entire life.[3] Whenever he would see 'Abd Allah ibn Umm Maktum, he would remark, "welcome o dear one about whom my Lord reproached

me ('*atabani rabbi*)" and in honoring him would extend his robe for him to wear.[4] Sa'diyya Shaikh has highlighted some of the important lessons to be learned from the incident,[5] but it is the reordering of priorities with disability in focus that is particularly pertinent. On this, Shaikh comments:

> As such, this narrative does not simply help us to illuminate the margins but also functions discursively to pivot the disabled person into the heart of the ethical discourse about moral subjectivity. The narrative renders Abdullah's impairment (blindness) or "difference" from the able-bodied persons fully visible while simultaneously asserting his complete moral agency and total equality within the community of believers.[6]

What this account of 'Abd Allah ibn Umm Maktum results in is that the Qur'an "invites him and by extension all forms of disability and 'otherness' that might be placed at the social margins into an egalitarian centre of shared human value," one that allows a blind man—a person with disability—to occupy "the focal point of the divine gaze, a gaze that sees fully and clearly and renounces alterity and calls for life-giving and nurturing forms of sociality."[7] Given this centrality, the alliance between Islamic studies and disability studies needs further strengthening so that Muslim persons with disability can claim their scripture and appropriate their disability discourse in a meaningful and critically constructive way. The present chapter is a small attempt at forging this alliance between both disciplines for a productive engagement but all too aware that, in so doing, it was done with enormous shortcomings.

Disability

Many verses of the Qur'an and numerous reports from the Prophet that form the Hadith do not address a special category of "disability" as the modern English term is understood, defined, and used by the World Health Organization (WHO) or related institutions.[8] In fact, it is arguable the concept of disability in the conventional sense may not be found in the Qur'an in that there is not a single term that encompasses the impairments typically associated with disability in the modern English context. Rather, two senses seem to be used in the Islamic source texts: the first sense is something approximating a person (or category) who is in a socially disadvantaged state or condition where the requisite values and qualities necessary for living and interacting as a member of society are absent or minimally present.[9] Generalized adjectives referring to persons with such states and conditions include orphans (*yatim*), the weak,

(*da'if*), the oppressed (*mustad'af*), the destitute (*miskin*), the sick (*marid*), the poor (*faqir*), and the traveler (*musafir*). The second sense is instances of specific impairments, whether (1) sensory impairments like muteness (*kharas*), blindness (*'ama*), and deafness (*samam*); (2) physical impairments like being immobile (*a'raj*); or (3) mental impairment like loss of sanity (*majnun*) or cognitive functioning,[10] although leprosy does receive a comparatively extensive treatment in the literature than others.[11] The benefits of this kind of terminology have been noted:

> First, the lack of a term comparable to disability in the classical Islamic sources affirms the moral neutrality and normalcy of disability as a fact of life. There is no stigma or evil associated with any term to describe individuals with disabilities. Indeed, the words used are entirely descriptive. Moreover, whereas the English term *disability* contains an explicit denotation of "lacking ability" and is laced with a negative connotation, the classical Arabic words do not contain an indication of "absence," thereby avoiding the creation of an implicit norm that excludes disability. Second, the classical sources recognise disability in the context of both individual condition and social disadvantage, using the relevant terms in discussion of individual rights as well as obligations of societal responsibility and service.[12]

Owing to this lack of singular all-encompassing term, it could be considered that disability and any spectrum of genetic, congenital, and acquired disabilities be taken as subtypes subsumed under the general adverse states of afflictions and misfortunes (*musiba*) mentioned in the Qur'an or, alternatively, as a fact of diversity in creation (the "normalcy of difference")[13] as mentioned in al-Rum, verse 22 and other chapters that invite the readers to reflect on that diversity. Disability on the theodicy models to be examined in this chapter is broadly conceived as something that is a cause of not only pain and suffering but also dysfunction and loss, meaning that disability causes psychosomatic distress and agony, hinders functionality, and curtails opportunities and possibilities to flourish as a social agent in a lived context.[14] These outcomes are involuntary and externally imposed whether by God determining that as part of His decree (*qada'*), through the agency of another by infliction of harm, or through the socially constructed apparatus that creates and imposes states of exclusion. Despite these tangible adverse realities, disability will be argued to have multiple instrumental value beyond the parameters of the person with disability. Thus, an assumption here is that the task of theodicy discussed in the previous chapter is a feasible enterprise, meaning that if

God's acts and motives are guided by His wisdom, mercy, and justice, and these are amenable to a certain degree to human reason, some possible explanations can be given that may justify God's permission of disability. The chapter will for the most part refer to persons with disability who are not constituted by impediments to their functioning and positioning as legally and morally obligated persons before the law (*mukallafin*).[15] Thus, disability here primarily focuses on those without severe sensory, cognitive, and intellectual disabilities that considerably diminish meaningful human functioning or modalities of disability that fail to reach some defined minimum threshold of such functioning. However, mention will be made of those who do suffer from such challenging states and conditions where it becomes especially pertinent for the discussion or where the theodicy directly relates to it.

In Islamic theology, the discussion regarding why specifically persons with disability are made to endure pain and suffering falls under the general topic of why the righteous or innocent suffer. Those considered righteous include divinely inspired Prophets and Messengers who are impeccable (in that they do not commit sins) as well as saints (*awliya'*) and general pious believers. Those categorized as innocent include children, the severely disabled, and animals—those lacking the requisite capacity for legal and moral obligation before the law (*ghayr mukallafin*). The deep theological problem of disability raised questions in the minds of early Muslims. The arch heretic within Muslim heresiographical literature al-Jahm b. al-Safwan (d. 128/746), for example, believed God acted solely based on His power and not out of His mercy or wisdom and so we ought not to be surprised if we see distressing phenomena. Ibn Taymiya relates an incident about Jahm gathering his students around lepers and in mocking fashion points at the lepers, remarking that they are a result of the work of an absolutely merciful God:

> It was related regarding him that he [Jahm] would go out among the lepers exclaiming "look at what the Most Merciful does to such people!" denying [God] the attribute of mercy and alleging that He acts solely on His will unguided by any specific wise purposes.[16]

The general problem of unmerited suffering for persons today makes them "doubt God's goodness" and "does little to placate a righteous person's fear of earthly misery and suffering." Indeed, the idea of a person's "predetermined suffering implicates God in the authorship of an act that seems to cause both physical and moral evil."[17]

This chapter therefore will primarily focus on the interrelated

connections between sin, punishments, and the grueling circuit of existential trials and tribulations as they relate to innocents like persons with disability and how that can be explained within an Islamic scriptural and value-framework.

Retribution Theodicy

Some verses of the Qur'an suggest that physical disabilities arise out of some prior committal of sin that forms the reason for God punishing communities or individuals in various ways. Disability on this reading—although not a demonological symbol—is nevertheless a signifier of God's wrath and discipline. This indeed is how some of the companions of the Prophet Muhammad interpreted their personal experiences with afflictions believing that God individualized His punishment by specifically meting it out on them. Advocating this kind of theodicy rests on a retributive idea of God's justice, which is a supernaturally originated but temporally enacted chastisement that is not primarily for corrective purposes but a direct recompense for wrongdoing. Michael Murray explains the multiple functions of this divine punishment: "Defenders of the punishment theodicy have argued that pain can be good for one (or more) of four things: *rehabilitation*, *deterrence*, *societal protection*, and *retribution*."[18] Abdulziz Sachedina explains this retributive view as "a divinely sanctioned evil inflicted to teach humanity in general—as opposed to a particular person—a lesson in humility."[19] Sachedina also notes the human irresponsibility that brings about just deserts where "the guilt and suffering that attend the evil perpetrated by a human free agent are often viewed as the just deserts of the wrongdoer" and therefore a nature "correlation is drawn between the freely committed evil and the personal suffering endured by the human author of evil."[20]

In contrast, Rispler-Chaim in *Disability in Islamic Law* optimistically claims that "it is never proclaimed that the disease is predestined by Allah so that the ill Muslim has an opportunity to repent or that disease is a way of punishment for certain sins." In fact, she insists, nowhere does it mention "in the Qur'an, Sunna or fiqh" any "clear causality established between Allah and on the onset of a disease and/or disability in a believer."[21] Sara Scalenghe also shares this optimistic view. She writes that "the central tenets and overarching moral framework of the Qur'an display many similarities to those of the Bible, but the notion of impairment as a product of divine retribution does not feature prominently in Islamic theology" and hence the overall "link between impairment and sin was decidedly de-emphasized," explaining the main reason being due to the "function of the absence in Islamic theology of the doctrine of

original sin, of human as inherently sinful beings, which is central to Christianity."[22]

This kind of view that imputes the cause of disability to endowed human agency and not God, of course, assumes that the Qur'an endorses an anthropology of *autonomy* and not an *anthropology* of determinism. Yet, Qur'anic verses do seem to establish a causal link between various types of affliction (personal or communal) and sin. This would be how many premodern Qur'an commentators have read the verses. If disability falls under afflictions and misfortunes and if they are caused because of sin, then disability would be caused because of sin. In al-Nisa', verse 79, for example, it reads that *what comes to you of good is from God, but what comes to you of bad, is from yourself*. The term "good" (*hasana*) is often interpreted to broadly equate with divine favors like prosperity, health, and well-being, and the word "bad" (*sayyi'a*) is taken as a counterpart to good and is broadly equated with "misfortunes" (*musiba*) like calamities and infertility.[23] It is God who is ultimately responsible for inflicting suffering, not human beings, and the suffering can be the conferral of disability. Sachedina notes some of the theological problems this view or language about God's permission of afflictions and suffering creates such as imputing evil to God, "in other words," on this kind of view, "both the Qur'an and Muslim traditions treat suffering as both an inevitable aspect of human experience, and as a problem of faith or theodicy, as it is ultimately the Almighty Creator who causes evil or suffering."[24]

On the causative aspect of the verse, one reading of "*from yourself*" is "on account of your sins" and in a second reading it is more generally, "on account of your actions."[25] Another verse purported to establish a link between afflictions and sin is in al-Rum, verse 41: *corruption has appeared throughout the land and sea by [reason of] what the hands of people have earned so He may let them taste part of [the consequence of] what they have done that perhaps they will return [to righteousness]*. Ibn al-Jawzi (d. 597/1200) interprets *what the hands of people have earned* as "due to the acts of sin such people committed."[26] Moreover, in al-Shura, verse 30 states that *And whatever strikes you of affliction—it is for what your hands have earned; but He pardons much*. Al-Razi equates afflictions in this verse with illnesses among other things. He comments, "what is meant here by 'afflictions' (*musiba*) are disliked states and conditions like pain, long-term illnesses, being drowned or struck by lightning and similar disasters."[27] Al-Baydawi (d. 685/1286) interprets *what your hands have earned* as "due to your sins and acts of disobedience (*ma'asikum*)."[28] Ibn Kathir (d. 774/1373) in his commentary of this verse alludes to the gravity of sin and its cause for divine retribution through affliction:

[The verse means] whatever misfortune befalls you, O people, is because of evil deeds that you have already done, and "*He pardons much*" refers to evil deeds—He does not punish you for them but He pardons them. "*And if God were to punish men for that which they earned, he would not leave a moving creature on the surface of the earth.*"[29]

This scriptural connection between possible blighted bodies, physical affliction, and sin was also a personalized connection made by early Muslims. The companion of the Prophet 'Imran b. al-Husayn (d. 52/672) is an example as related by the Egyptian polymath Jalal al-Din al-Suyuti (d. 911/1505) who directly attributes his physical disease to his religious failings:

Some of the companions [of 'Imran] went to see him. He had been afflicted with a disease on his body. They remarked when they saw him: "we feel really sorry for you because of what we see on you." ['Imran] replied: "don't feel aggrieved because this is due to a sin but God pardons more" and then he recited the verse "*and whatever strikes you of affliction—it is for what your hands have earned.*"[30]

The Qur'an commentator of Andalusia Ibn 'Atiya (d. 541/1146) relates a few incidents involving early Muslim pietistic figures and how they explained the cause of their various afflictions being sin:

Al-Hamdani said: I saw once on the palm of Shurayh's hand a small ulcer. I asked him: O Abu Umayya, what is this? He replied [reciting the verse]: "*it is for what your hands have earned; but He pardons much.*" Ibn 'Awn said: when Muhammad b. Sirin was saddled with debt, he became distressed because of it. He said [in his condition]: I know why I am in this distress; it is due to a sin I committed forty years ago. Ahmad b. Abi al-Hawari said: Abu Sulayman al-Darani was asked: what is with the virtuous (*fudala'*) in removing any blame from the bad that befalls them? He replied: they know very well that God Most High is testing them due to their sins and then he recited the verse, "*it is for what your hands have earned; but He pardons much.*"[31]

There are also many cases reported in various hadiths of specific afflictions of disability or diseases explained due to improper actions, misdemeanors, or wrong actions. One explicit example is that of Prophet Sulayman who on account of failing to utter "God willing" (*insha' Allah*)

for his ambition to produce offspring with his numerous wives that will become warriors in God's path was granted "half a human baby" (*shiqq al-ghulam*) from one wife as a chastisement,[32] which may be understood as a baby with dysmorphic features. Another example includes the case of Jamra bint al-Harith (or Harath) b. 'Awf al-Muzani whose father tried to excuse her from being proposed to by the Prophet by claiming that she had leprosy (*baras*). The Prophet on realizing this stated that she will be afflicted with leprosy due to this blatant false explanation and it occurred. Al-Ghazali reports this under the closing section on the Prophet's miracles and signs from *The Book on the Etiquette of Living* in *Ihya' 'ulum al-din*:

> The Prophet proposed to a woman but her father said that she had leprosy in order to prevent the proposal from taking place when she in fact did not. The Prophet on account of this said, "she will have that." She as a result became a leper known as the mother of Shabib b. al-Barsa' the poet and there are many other examples of his miracles and signs.[33]

In a narration reported in Abu Dawud's compilation, Yazid b. Bahram recounts how he became crippled (and was called the "seated one" [*al-muq'ad*]) for cursing the Prophet: "I saw a crippled man at Tabuk. He (the man) said: 'I passed riding a donkey in front of the Prophet who was praying.' He said (cursing him): 'O God, cut off his walking!' Thereafter, I could not walk."[34] The esteemed Hadith critic Ibn Abi Hatim al-Razi (d. 327/938) relates that Abu al-Bilad recited to al-'Ala' b. Badr verse 30 from al-Shura: "I recited the verse *and whatever strikes you of affliction, it is for what your hands have earned* and he asked: 'why did I lose my eyesight while a young boy?' He replied: because of the sins of your parents."[35] This is one explicit report of an early pious figure interpreting the sins of one's parents as the direct cause of their child's impairment. These examples and others illustrate how a form of retribution theodicy is a way to explain suffering. Disability thereby is explained through merited suffering for the iniquitous. A focal point of the theodicy seems to be that God afflicting individuals or communities with calamities or specific illnesses, diseases, and/or impairments (and thereby causing their disability) does not bring into question His fairness or justice but brings to light the failure of human beings to live by revelatory commandments. The rule of human worldly success is: living by God's stipulations brings about prosperity and success and the contrary brings about misery and affliction. The examples cited from individuals within the early Muslim communities indicate this shift of focus away from God's retribution to the causal

agency or culpability of the sufferer. This provides a useful hermeneutical window into the way affliction was understood, framed, and internalized by such a community.

The retributive theodicy generates some serious objections. First, it is extremely restrictive as an explanatory model because by no means is all disability a result of wrongdoing. Hence, merely equating disability with sin in this reductive way is truncated in its explanatory scope. Second, it seems to suggest that persons with disability are entirely or partially at fault for the disabilities they have acquired. This further suggests that there are no other welcome, positive, and beneficial resources within the Qur'an and Hadith to ameliorate the pain, distress, and anxieties caused by disability except divine judgment. Hope and comfort do not seem like possibilities on this model. Third, seeing disabilities as punishment for sins or moral transgressions whether in a prior state of an able-bodied perpetrator or by one's parents and ancestors would be to characterize it as a pollution, an evil, and hence by implication define the very default existence of a disabled person as evil. This would be laying the basis for a kind of regressive theology regarding persons with disability when the Prophet came with a new and transformative engagement with disability to a society that valorized physical prowess, strength, and horsemanship and assumed a physicalist aesthetics. Such a denigrating perspective on disability would also appear to contradict firm Qur'anic principles such as (1) there is no transferal of sin; (2) there is no sin without accountability, (3) no one can bear the burden of another, (4) no one is punished for the crimes of another,[36] and (5) none shall be burdened with more than they can bear.[37] A possible response to this, however, is that the association or causal link between disability (mainly impairments) and moral infraction in the Qur'an and hadiths is profoundly ambivalent. Indeed, there does not seem to be a conscious causal association in these Islamic primary sources between sin and disability. Ghaly points out that verses of the Qur'an and interpretations of the hadiths of the Prophet "indicate that disabilities *may be* but need not *necessarily be* the result of committing sins" and gives examples:

> For instance, when Mu'awiya b. Abi Sufyan was afflicted with facial paralysis, he mentioned three possible reasons, i.e., gaining reward, receiving punishment and finally receiving a disciplinary reproach. According to this view, in the normal course of events disobedient people receive more than one warning before being punished. Disabilities or misfortunes, as punishments, befall those who insist on paying no attention to such

warnings and make no efforts to return to the straight path, declare no repentance to God and continue their disobedience.[38]

This association between disability and sin is perhaps more to do with how specific companions of the Prophet interpreted their own realities of disease, disfigurement, and impairments through the prism of sin rather than it being a scripturally espoused normative conceptual framework for understanding the etiology of disability in general.

Therapeutic Theodicy

This way of explaining the existence of disability is to characterize it as curative, meaning it serves to contribute to the overall afterlife well-being of the sufferer. The disability would be a temporal means to securing pardon of sins or afterlife reward. Rispler-Chaim notes:

> Disease is not perceived by Muslims as an expression of Allah's wrath or as punishment from heaven either, but as a test which can atone for one's sins. Health and sickness become part of the continuum of being, and prayer remains the salvation in both health and sickness. A Prophetic tradition asserts "Whoever dies in any illness is a martyr." This attests that an illness may have some redeeming powers, such as atoning for sins and the like.[39]

Ghaly describes this as a "cathartic function," a process whereby God provides positive spiritual relief for any persons with disability from his/her strong experiences of suffering "by purging the sinner from his sins and bringing him relief from greater torment in the Hereafter."[40] The Prophet is reported to have mentioned many times the therapeutic nature of hardship, suffering, pain, and affliction. In one version of the narration, the Prophet states as reported by Muhammad b. Khalid al-Sulami: "From his father and his grandfather who was a companion of the Messenger of God who said: I heard the Messenger of God say: 'When God has previously decreed for a servant a rank which he has not attained by his action, He afflicts him in his body (*ibtala Allah fi jasadihi*), or his property or his children.'"[41] The representation of bodily affliction to encompass physical disability in this context actually becomes a token of God's benevolence and mercy toward a person with disability. This is underpinned by God's desire for their afterlife elevation in religious rank. In another narration, reported by the companions Abu Sa'id al-Khudri (d. 74/693) and Abu Hurayra (d. 58/678), the Prophet assures that "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 his sins for that."[42] The Hadith equates an acquired disability with atonement of sins. Although God on the majority theological understanding is the cause of all types of afflictions and misfortunes, the causes are for the benefit of the recipient because it constitutes an automatic atonement for any sins. Even more explicit regarding the therapeutic nature of disability is the following narration attributed to the companion ‘Abd Allah ibn Mas’ud (d. 83/702): "loss of eyesight is a means for forgiveness; loss of hearing is a means for forgiveness, and any bodily impairment will receive a similar recompense."[43] Ibn al-Qayyim elaborates on the wisdom behind this kind of therapeutic theodicy:

> Were it not that The Most Glorified treats *(yudawi)* His servants with the remedy of trials and calamities, they would transgress and overstep the mark. When God wills good for His servant, He gives him the medicine of calamities and trials according to his situation and circumstances, so as to cure him from all fatal illnesses and diseases, until He purifies and cleanses him, and then makes him qualified for the most honourable position in this world, which is that of being a true servant of God and for the greatest reward in the Hereafter, which is that of seeing Him and being close to Him.[44]

Here as well, there is overlap, with disabilities being explained through a communion theodicy,[45] where in this case God determines or creates a person with specific disabilities as a means to allow them to draw nearer to Him. The temporal struggle through life for any person with a severe disability and indeed for their committed carer is compensated with God's pleasure and proximity. Thus, in the midst of suffering, the afflicted may draw closer to God in the end.

I mentioned above how the retributive theodicy model explains disability as a possible chastisement for temporal commission of sin; there are, however, alternative suggestions whereby the disability is actually a beneficent means of reward from God (and not a chastisement) as affirmed by the Prophet in several narrations. This would mean that any disability in reality is a sign of God's mercy and not His wrath. In a hadith, the Prophet comments:

> Whatever befalls you of illness, punishment or misfortune in the worldly life is because of what your hands have wrought, but God is more tolerant than doubling the punishment [by inflicting it again] in the Hereafter. As

for what God has pardoned in [the worldly] life, [one should know that] God is more bountiful than reverting [to punishing] after His pardon.[46]

This narration also suggests that God does not punish after pardoning; that is, God may reward in multiples but never punishes in multiples. This beneficence is further brought out in how those with disability lose no opportunities to gain divine favor or reward due to their disability. A principle of continuity in rewards is employed by God regarding a person's predisabled state with their postdisabled state. Ghaly explains:

Another sign of God's mercy mentioned in the tradition in this regard concerns the rewards of good deeds that the afflicted person did before the affliction hindered him/her from continuing to do them. In Hadith collections, one finds separate chapters on the reward of the sick (*ajr al-marid*). These chapters comprise a number of prophetic traditions suggesting that the rewards of such deeds continue to be recorded as if they were still being done.[47]

One such narration Ghaly is referring to is:

No Muslim would be visited with an affliction in his body save God would order the Guardians [Angels] who guard him by saying, "Write down for My servant every day and night the equal [reward] of the good [*khayr*] he was doing as long as he is confined in My fetter [i.e., sickness]."[48]

Here, any good action by which a person accrues reward as an able-bodied person will continue to accrue the same or more reward as long as they remain in their acquired state of disability. It would be as though they were directly committing the action as an able-bodied person. Ghaly writes:

By extension to disability, we may conclude that a person who used to listen to a specific portion of the Qur'an every day and later on was hindered from doing so by deafness is a further example. The divine rewards accorded for this pious act would go on being counted as if he were still in the habit of listening to the Qur'an every day.[49]

Hence, although physical disabilities can affect the overall modality of engaging with stipulated and mandatory religious injunctions pertaining to ritual and behavior, insofar as the spiritual quality and afterlife compensation are concerned, nothing whatsoever diminishes. This theodicy

shifts perspective away from God's agency as it relates to the cause and affliction of disability and appears to locate significance more in scripturally grounded imaginings of how God relates to His creatures through His exemplification of various names and qualities (*al-asma' wa-l-sifat*) such as love, benevolence, mercy, and compassion. These grounded imaginings convey how persons of disability are meant to understand the way the afterlife reward scheme operates for any pain and suffering incurred in this life and how that ultimately embodies gain and not loss.

Critical remarks from a disability perspective on this theodicy include how, for example, it rests at core on a principle of delayed reward. God propositions a person with disability with a deferred reward of a purgative state for enduring the agony of suffering in the world. Yet all the while, the time delay between a person's temporal suffering, its purportedly curative work, and the final reward it brings about suggests God recedes into the background of the suffering, becoming a hidden observer to the person of disability instead of their healer—approximating more a *deus absconditus* instead of the *deus revelatus*. Moreover, the theodicy creates dissonance in persons with disability rather than strong optimism. It fails to facilitate any requisite congruence between one's *concepts* of God and one's *images* of God.[50] The former constitutes the cognitive beliefs about God a person with disability acquires through discursive learning and being taught about the divine from various social and institutional sources—in short, the theology they adopt. The latter forms the emotional and relational experience of God that develops as a latent construct primarily through the way God relates to the lives of persons with disability. The pain and suffering arising from disability generates a discrepancy between the concept of God and the image of God that seems not to be filled by descriptive notifications of the therapeutic function of disability. God would want to minimize the dissonance a person has between these concepts about Him and the images of Him as this would alleviate the cognitive suffering.

Greater-good Theodicy

This model attempts to explain the pain and suffering caused by disability based on a higher value obtained in the afterlife. God will compensate the bad arising from temporal hardship of a person with disability with an outweighing good in the eschaton. In other words, God will allow some evil E such as suffering due to disabilities if and only if it can be used to bring about a greater good G. The permission or allowance of disability is necessary for the realization of a greater good. The theodicy rests on a correspondence between persons and their receiving a greater good.

The net bad judged by human beings to have registered in the history or life-course of a person with disability would, in the greater scheme of existence, be balanced or more than exceed the balance. This kind of greater-good (G-G) theodicy can be extracted from numerous narrations attributed to the Prophet that accord divine reward and tributes to those who suffered impairments or loss of human bodily and cognitive assets. The sixteenth-century hadith commentator and theologian Mulla ʿAli al-Qari (d. 1606) composed a small text called *Tasliyat al-aʿma ʿala baliyat al-ʿama* ("Consoling the Blind for the Affliction of Blindness") in which he "gathered forty narrations (*arbaʿun hadithan*)[51] on patience in the face of trials, gratitude for divine blessings, and contentment with the divine decree in times of happiness and hardship"[52] as a way of consoling those afflicted with visual impairments whether congenital or acquired. The greater good rewards and tributes discussed specifically regarding visual and hearing impairments by Muslim theologians are generically applicable to all types of disability as they are subsumed under afflictions. The set of greater goods for persons with disabilities includes:

1. Elevation in the person's rank before God due to the disability.[53]
2. Assurance of Paradise for the person suffering through the disability.[54]
3. Brightening face on Judgement Day on account of patience through adversity.[55]
4. Atonement of sins.[56]
5. Becoming beloved to God.[57]
6. God's tribute for the person before the angelic host.[58]

One could argue perhaps that this model is not theoretically a theodicy as much as it is an eschatology. The suffering and pain arising from disability in this world will find its defeat in the hereafter through a myriad manifestation of God's mercy and beneficence. In this way, the perspective that disability symbolizes some representation of evil is transformed into radiant symbols of dignity, elevation, and laudation in the eschaton. However, this theodicy raises difficult theological issues.[59] One issue is that it may seem like false assurances, a way of deferring the problem into the realm of a later existence which would do nothing to assuage or comfort the person with disability right here and now. In the short-term perspective, it would not seem therapeutic at all. Moreover, on the G-G theodicy model, disability would either have to be *incidental* to or *necessary* for securing the set of afterlife goods mentioned in the hadiths. By "incidental" is meant that the particular set of goods does not need that specific disability. In other words, could God have realized the set of goods

for a person in this world without granting that particular disability on them. This would further mean that the disability is purely gratuitous on God's part—the set of goods did not need that bad. If, on the other hand, the disability is necessary for securing the set of goods mentioned, then it would have to be demonstrated how the set of goods mentioned can only be secured through the specific disability of that person. If God is unable to secure those goods without that disability, it would seem to suggest there is something that He cannot bring about, namely a set of goods without a specific disability. This has implications on divine omnipotence. If the set of goods is part of God's eschatological compensation or reward plan, and it cannot be achieved or completed without the disability to secure those set of goods, then God must make disability unavoidably part of His plan. This would mean as well that God wills the disability on people. He would not be able to do otherwise and he would be the cause of evil. Furthermore, it seems that if suffering through disability secures a greater set of goods, then the more a person with disability suffers, the better it would be. It would be better to leave the person with disability to endure the adverse condition by placating them with news of a greater reward in store. Finally (and related to this previous point) on a practical level, if God brings about disability because it will secure a greater set of goods for an individual or group, then there may be a diminished motive for addressing illnesses and diseases through medical intervention. There may be no desire to eliminate or reduce the suffering caused by various disabilities because it is in fact a necessary adverse state for securing a greater set of goods. The result will be an inculcation of passivity in the face of affliction. Sachedina makes this very point, noting how "the Qur'an admonishes human beings to endure adversity patiently" and although enduring such adversity may instill "further confidence in the wisdom of God, who allows affliction as a necessary part of a greater plan" it nevertheless "seems to reinforce Muslim passivity in the face of afflictions."[60] The attitude of passivity becomes an indicator of pietistic resignation to God's overarching program. It would not be right on this logic, therefore, to intervene with medical measures for the care of persons with disability. In the context of medical intervention and application, Sachedina worries that such scriptural references to resignation before God's plans become a "major source of a quietism, and resignation" that will dangerously "impede the seeking of medical treatment in some quarters of Muslim society" because it is God who is regarded as "the only healer, who, if he willed, could cure the illness and eliminate suffering" and a "true believer" would put his/her "trust in God and depend on him and none other for deliverance from pain and suffering."[61] A

clear example of this kind attitude is in the incident of Sa'ida al-Asadiya who came to the Prophet and asked him to pray for her well-being as she was prone to seizures because of her epilepsy. 'Ata' ibn Abi Rabah relates the narration in full:

> Ibn 'Abbas said to me ['Ata' ibn Abi Rabah]: "Shall I show you a woman of the people of Paradise?" I replied: "of course." He said: "This black lady came to the Prophet and said: 'I get attacks of epilepsy and my body becomes uncovered; please pray to God for me.' The Prophet said [to her]: 'If you wish, be patient and Paradise is yours; or if you wish, I will pray to God to cure you.' [The lady] said: 'I will remain patient,' and added: 'but I become uncovered, so please pray to God for me that I may not become uncovered.' So [the Prophet] prayed to God for her."[62]

One of the most senior hadith commentators of the Mamluk period Ibn Hajar al-'Asqalani (who incidentally had to relinquish his senior administrative post as supervisor due to his recurring ophthalmia)[63] comments on this narration:

> This narration contains lessons such as: epilepsy can be something positive. Patience in the face of suffering bequeaths paradise. Adopting the more severe course of action is more meritorious than acting on an exemption for anyone who knows his own ability and strength and will not weaken by adopting that which is more severe. In [the narration] is evidence for the permissibility of refusing medication and that the remedy for any illness is praying to God. Moreover, seeking refuge in God is more beneficial than taking prescribed drugs. Its effects and the body's reaction to it are greater than the physical remedies. However, the beneficial effects only occur if two matters exist: the first is from the aspect of the patient which is true sincerity and intention and the second is from the aspect of the practitioner whose heart must be firm with God-consciousness and reliance. And god knows best.[64]

Here, the lady opted out of choice to endure the difficulty of seizures over the easier option of being healed. She rationalized her preferences based on the two options and judged the alternative to be in her afterlife self-interest. In this way, her relinquishing medical intervention is interpreted as a meritorious and exemplary attitude toward personal disability in the face of hardship. Interestingly, second only to her pain and distress, the lady was extremely mindful of her compromised modesty in public when suffering these seizures and implored the Prophet to supplicate to

God to spare her from that. Her attitude captured the admiration of the Prophet's companions and the subsequent Muslim community in general because she emulated the moral paradigm of the Prophets like Ayyub (Job) who endured undeserved personal suffering with patience without challenging God to explain the reasons behind such afflictions.[65]

Educative Theodicy

The aim under this final theodicy model is to explain disability as possessing a pedagogical purpose. On the one hand, the person's disability becomes an enabling factor for virtue-building as well as cognitive illumination. This means that such persons develop moral properties to become a better servant of God in addition to gaining a better understanding of themselves and their lives, their role as God's temporal representatives (*khulafa'*), and indeed greater wisdom embedded in God's overarching scheme of creation and purpose through the realization or acquisition of their disability. On the other hand, disability on this model also constitutes a means whereby the Islamic social goods and virtues like hospitality (*diyafa*) can be structured and developed in order to enable individual and communal flourishing. Disability then despite its connection with vulnerability becomes an instrument of enlightened instruction to develop humility, poverty, and need for others in an interconnected relation of vulnerability and interdependency that collectively seeks to overcome suffering by endowing it with meaning-making significance.

Turning to the first part of the educative theodicy, which is the personal pedagogical context of disability, the explanatory angle here is that through divine trials and tribulations as tests, opportunities arise for augmentation of the self (*nafs*) in order to nurture it with qualities necessary for becoming a praiseworthy servant and representative of God.[66] Such inner attitudinal qualities, for example, include patience (*sabr*), gratitude (*shukr*), reliance on God (*tawakkul*), and states such as total submission and servitude to God (*'ubudiya*).[67] Traversing the journey of embracing and coping with disabilities on this account would be an ongoing religious test provided by God to activate that religious growth potential. Rouzati has extensively discussed the cosmological significance of the Qur'anic concept of "bala" (trials and tribulations in prosperity and adversity) as well as its related concept "fitna" (trials, tests, sedition) and has also discussed how both function as a means by which a person intellectually and spiritually augments and develops to overcome hardship and suffering.[68] Specifically on *bala'* and its cognate *ibtila*, her hypothesis is that "contrary to popular perception," *ibtila* is not simply to be understood as "synonymous with suffering"; rather, it is an "all-inclusive connotation"

by which "mankind is granted the opportunity to actualize the potential of his inner nature."[69] She continues, explaining the rationale for why God tests human beings through adversity:

The Qur'an explicitly affirms that man, as part of his human experience, will be put to the "test," *bala*, by various means of "good and bad." Consequently, the test encompasses the "negatives," illness, natural disasters, and loss of livelihood, and the "positives," wealth, and good health. What the Qur'an seems to emphasize, however, is man's behaviour and how he perceives the particular circumstances of his life. Needless to say that, by nature, while man strives for joy and happiness; he resists any undesirable situation which may cause him sadness and sorrow . . . however, from the Qur'anic perspective, adversity, misery, and human suffering, is central to man's spiritual development . . . This notion, which frequently appears in explicit terms in the Qur'an, illustrates that suffering is an instrument in the fulfilment of purposes of God in creation of humankind.[70]

Rumi describes the need for *bala'* in this vivid way:

When someone beats a rug with a stick, he is not beating the rug—his aim is to get rid of the dust.
Your inward is full of dust from the veil of I-ness, and that dust will not leave all at once.[71]

Mohammad Mobini gives the metaphor of the world as a "laboratory" for developing the experiential knowledge required for a real harmonious and qualitative relationship with God and creatures making earth "a testing ground for us in which we can test the different manners of existing and see what sort is the best." He notes that "God could have given us all such knowledge without sending us to this testing ground, but this would not have been experiential knowledge." In order to make the "necessary knowledge" God has given human beings about Himself effective, "He has sent them into this laboratory in order that their knowledge be supported and strengthened by experiential knowledge."[72]

Aslan also explains the Qur'anic perspective on the overall pedagogical role of trials and tests as well as the nature of suffering which "has sometimes been treated as a sign of spiritual development by society" and "has functioned as a means of building character and developing spiritually," treating it "as gifts from God," an "indicator which really confirms spiritual perfection."[73] Aslan also comments how the Qur'an accepts that suffering and hardship are "facts of human life, but it itself is there to

prepare believers, so that they are spiritually and psychologically ready to overcome such difficulties." The net spiritual profit gives outputs like being able to assess the quality of a believer's faith, testing sincerity of belief, or allowing the believer to evaluate what their true personality is or even what positive qualities they have developed.[74] Thus, on Aslan's view, like Mobini and Rouzati, the summative purpose of suffering is a means of God testing the believer in order that they become spiritually developed.[75]

The disability journey then can be seen as a way of God testing the person with disability in order to gauge whether there is in him/her a clear cognitive (re)orientation to their purpose of life here on earth and whether the adversity forges in him/her the desirable transformative religious qualities or positive internal and attitudinal values such as gratitude, patience, and reliance on God necessary to overcome it and thereby gain God's favor. The Islamic perspective informed by the Qur'an and Hadith is that persons with disability are not less than persons of lower moral standing excluded from the requirement of God's revealed religious agenda. There is no exclusion from a reciprocal relation with God on account of a disability. A person with disability undergoes no less of a religious engagement with God (and no less of a struggle) than a nondisabled person. Both are required to know and come to realize that God's power, will, and wisdom providentially govern the inexplicable working intricacies of the world and that in reality, neither of them have any real autonomy because they are under that sovereign direction of God. Neither have ownership over themselves because they are temporal vassals who have been entrusted with their bodies by God—abled and disabled—to fulfill their proper function: servitude and submission to His commandments. Because the Islamic narrative includes no notion of redemption through a savior, a person's "ultimate responsibility is to live according to the potentials of his inner nature capable of fully manifesting the Divine attributes, and yet, realize that the key element in actualization of these potentials is his 'free volition and choice.'"[76] One's able body therefore does not endow any metaphysical or spiritually significant privileges insofar as it relates to the purpose of existence, interior quality of worship, and the ultimate destination of return for all creatures. In fact, disability may be a stronger way to return back to God and a sharper reminder of the primordial covenant (*mithaq*) between all human beings and God mentioned in the Qur'an.[77] Rumi, following Junayd al-Baghdadi's (d. 297/910) covenantal mysticism, for example, "frequently references the primordial covenant, and points out that man is faced with afflictions and sorrow in

order to be reminded of his covenant with God. For him, this is precisely the mission of the prophets."[78] This is why Rumi elsewhere writes:

> In order to pull us up and help us travel, messenger after messenger comes from that Source of existence:
> Every heartache and suffering that enters your body and heart pulls you by the ear to the promised Abode.
> He has afflicted you from every direction in order to pull you back to the Directionless.[79]

In his work *Fihi ma fihi*, Rumi highlights how wealth and health can be two impediments to God and as a result become a severe test. He remarks:

> Between God and His servant are just two veils; and all other veils manifest out of thee: they are health, and wealth. The man who is well in body says, "Where is God? I do not know, and I do not see." As soon as pain afflicts him, he begins to say, "O God! O God!" communing and conversing with God. So you see that health was his veil, and God was hidden under that pain. As much as man has wealth and resources, he procures the means to gratifying his desires, and is preoccupied night and day with that. The moment indigence appears, his ego is weakened and he goes round about God.[80]

Far from disability being an impediment in drawing closer to God, it is able-bodied persons who are veiled from God on account of their functioning abilities because it leads them to haughtiness, which in turn causes them to be ignorant of their true reality and status as created beings. This haughtiness and ignorance also become a reason for their negligence in God's remembrance (*dhikr*). If disability shields a person from that negative consequence, it is actually a blessing. A narration of the Prophet in this regard reads: "The blind are not those who have lost their sight but those who have lost their insight."[81] This statement is supported by the Qur'an in al-Hajj, verse 46: *So, have they not travelled through the earth and do they not have hearts by which they reason and ears by which to hear? For indeed, it is not eyes that are blinded. But blinded are the hearts that are in the breasts*. Qur'anic exegetes interpreted this verse in a figurative sense:

> The heart has been used here [in the verse] as a reference to the intellect by way of synecdoche (*majaz mursal*) because the heart is the organ that

pumps blood—the fundamental object of life—to all the vital organs in the body, most important of which is the brain which is a component of the intellect. That is why in the verse it says "*by which they reason*" because the instrument of reasoning is the brain . . . it is not the eyes that see but the heart, meaning that the eyes and ears are the means by which knowledge is acquired from what is seen and heard. That which fathoms or grasps all that is [sensed] is the brain because if the brain does not contain the intellect, then the seer is like a blind person and the hearer a deaf person. Any problems with these senses are due only to a deficiency in the intellect. The second reference to blindness is metaphorical for loss of grasping what is sensed with the intellect despite the power of sight being sound and functional.[82]

In Islam, there is no default special right granted to able-bodied persons on account of their physicality. The body is not the center and the visible disability is not the peripheral and this is because of the lesser value given to the corporeal within the overall Islamic outlook. This does not mean Islam denies the lived experience of embodiment or even carnality,[83] but that its vision and aim were not a "somatic society"[84] that neither situates the body as *loci* of consumption and contestation nor constitutes it as the physical horizon for proper worship. For God, the only acceptable criterion of worship is the quality of consciousness, fear, and presence of Him within a person and this is an interior matter. In a hadith the Prophet reports that "Verily God does not look to your bodies (*ajsadikum*) nor to your faces but He looks only to your hearts (*qulubikum*)."[85] The commentators highlight how the heart is the emphasis and not the physical limbs. Al-Nawawi, for example, writes:

> This narration means that the outward actions do not of themselves realise God-consciousness (*taqwa*); rather God-consciousness occurs in the heart such as awe of God, fear of Him and vigilance of him. What is meant by "God looking" here is His rewarding and accounting a person, that is on account of what is in their hearts and not how they look on the outside. God's look encompasses everything. The whole point of the narration is that the heart alone is what is considered in all these matters.[86]

As for the second part of the educative theodicy, its core is constructed from an examination of the idea of hospitality within the Islamic tradition[87] drawing on Alasdair MacIntyre's concept of "virtues of acknowledged dependence"[88] in addition to a recent paper by Kevin Timpe and Aaron D. Cobb[89] employing hospitality as a way of God providing