

## THE PROBLEM OF EVIL: ISLAMIC THEODICY

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### Abstract

Human nature possesses an innate duality, animality and spirituality. Where there is body being made up of clay enhances the materialistic qualities that urge animality, there is soul too being from divine breath possesses Godly essence that innately urges spirituality. Negligence of any one of the two sides gives rise to inner conflict.

What became to be known as Lucifer, Satan or Iblis, is the chief of evil. Iblis literally means 'one bewildered by despair' and it is despair the source of all illness, direct or indirect. He rivals God against his intrinsic nature. Evil rampant in the world is, therefore, the aftermath of injustice. Lack of justice entails disturbance of balance, which than results in all ailments of body and maladies of soul.

Islamic concept of man thus swings like pendulum between the polarities of exoteric and esoteric aspects that cannot be halved. Where there is body made up of clay that enhances the materialistic qualities that urge animality, there is soul too from divine breath that possesses innate Godly essence that urges spirituality. Negligence of any one of the two sides gives rise to inner conflict. This duality reflects at all levels of human situation. Serene are those who succeed in harmonizing the internal forces without disturbing the necessary discipline. Such people in fact do justice to their selves. In Islamic terminology this is called *adl*, which is *placing something in its proper stead*. It is human responsibility to shun the avenues of the evil within and without, and harmonize one's inner self through hope besides despair. This is the key to God and the criterion is solely based upon intention.

**Keywords:** evil, satan, Iblis, determinism, free-will

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The problem of evil is one of the utmost challenging issues in the area of religion and philosophy. It is inapprehensible for the human mind to accept the existence of evil, pain and suffering in the presence of an absolutely good deity. The famous philosopher David Hume in his 'Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion' aptly puts it:

Is God willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then he is impotent.  
Is he able, but not willing? Then he is malevolent.  
Is he both able and willing?  
What then is evil? (part 10)

The meaning of goodness attributed to God needs to be implied in a divine milieu. The underlying assumption that a good God should not let evil coexist may be true with a Christian view of God but is a blithe disregard to God's omnipotence and omniscience in Muslim understanding. Islam attributes divine wisdom in permitting evil and suffering either resulting from the nature of the universe or from action of free beings. Many of the people may suffer as a test while others suffer from past, present or future sins just to secure them from their erroneous choices which may make their present or future life miserable. God says in Qur'an,

"Do you think that you will enter paradise without any trials while you have known the examples of those who passed away before you? They were afflicted with suffering and adversity and were so violently shaken up that even the Prophet and the believers with him cried out: 'When will God's help come?' Be aware, God's help is close" (Qur'an Ch Al-Baqarah: 214).

The story of *Khidr* in the 18th chapter of Qur'an from verses 60 to 82 is an eloquent account of it where *Khidr* concludes his sea journey with Prophet Moses by saying:

"All this was done as a mercy from your Lord. What I did was not done by my own will. That is the interpretation of those actions which you could not bear to watch with patience" (Qur'an Ch Al-Kahf: 82).

Happiness or suffering, gain or loss are broad terms in English connotation. What concord is each involve a moral judgment. Typically, one's loss is someone else's gain and vice versa. Similarly, what appears as suffering today may turn out to be a blessing in the long run. The Qur'anic context of *khayr* and *shar* does not usually imply a statement about right and wrong, rather the benefit or loss that something brings (Qur'an, Ch Fussilat: 49; Yunus: 11). Human beings generally believe that what they desire is actually good for them but Qur'an points out that people often oversight in their judgment about good and evil (Qur'an, Ch Al-Imran: 180; Al-Baqarah: 216) and thus characterizes good as something that is beneficial in terms of immediate pleasure, neglecting the long-term effects.

## 2. EVIL AND EXISTENCE

Whatever of good reaches you, is from God, but whatever of evil befalls you, is from yourself (Qur'an Ch Al-Nisa': 79).

The necessary existence is one that is the source of all possible contingent existence. This sole existence is of God. Evil surely is in His foreknowledge. God the all-omniscient, the all-omnipotent and the all-benevolent let evil arise with a wiser purpose as a whole and for the future.

Every existence from heavenly spheres to three kingdoms, is journeying to its summit. Evil is the aftermath of human actions going against their natural summit innate and intrinsic in creation. This is because man in his hasty endeavors to seek fortunes violates his abilities to progress and sustain, which is an innate nature of human beings. When something is done with only short-term goals like materialism in mind, the deeds often turn malicious. As an aftermath human self suffers. Hence an act becomes evil when it is not done in its proper due.

In the presence of evil, good is better revealed, appreciated and urged for. Evil open the door for higher orders of existence which could not be possible otherwise. There wouldn't have been any curiosity or urge for betterment if evil weren't there. People would have been all content with their states which is the very quality of Junnah.

### a.Existence Of Evil As A Substance

The existence of Iblis as a counter force along with God in an analogous enigma, and likewise the pact on the subject of mankind, in which, Iblis has been given the right to seduce man, beside the fact that God did not positively 'wished' it. What later became to be termed as Lucifer, Satan, Devil and Iblis in Islam, is actually the representative of ego that rivals God. Evil mirrors Iblis's fall from grace on account of his arrogance. Iblis, literally translated "one struck dumb with despair", wanted to be the most loved of all the beings. In essence, despair is the source of all illness directly and indirectly like smoking drugs or other poisonous materials are taken in a state of despair. The root of purification is in the breath. The breath of despair and that of hope is different.

## 3. GENESIS OF EVIL VIS-À-VIS OUR EARTH

When the Angels inquired about why God wanted them to bow down to Adam, God asked them to recite His names on which they faithfully conceded that they knew only what God had permitted them. Then Adam recited the names of God that his soul was imprinted with and the angels fell in prostration before him. Iblis plunged in despair at the most favored place renounced his love. He went against his own nature. Being raised the most authoritative and superior in the realm of angels at best, so much so that he did not like being the second best and fell because of pride. He was consequently cursed and banished from the mercy of Lord, but on his asking for reprieve in exchange for his years of service/worship to God, he was given respite to use his powers till an appointed time. Iblis then vowed to God that he would adorn the earth for mankind by using all his powers in every way possible (Qur'an Al-Hijr: 26-44). The pact presupposes the cosmic reality or tendency of Iblis being a passionately self-willed lover that made him renounce in angry

egoism his principles. Iblis wanted nothing of a God but he was not happy with what was chosen for him because he interpreted divine will in the illusion of this realm. The illusion that makes us want something for ourselves, when nothing exists as separate from God and there is no "self" other than God. In his desperate act he revolted against his intrinsic nature and the natural summit, that of the created towards its Lord and Creator, that of submission, is Islam, is every religion.

The knowledge of God is ingrained in man (Quran Al-Araf: 172-73). Nevertheless, the union of divine breathe with body transmute it into a state of forgetfulness (Arabic: *ghaflah*). A great deal of evil that befalls human beings is due to this *ghaflah*. Therefore the wise say much evil comes from a state of man's own self; much of ill fortune that befalls us becomes ill fortune because of our subjective reaction to it. The purpose of our creation was never to conquer our dreams but to awaken the conscience from its state of *ghaflah*- both intellectually and spiritually. Hence, the descent of the first human being Adam on earth was predetermined in order to develop his full potential and return back to God.

### a. Stirring Thoughts

Man's desires are stirred by two kinds of thoughts: praiseworthy, which is 'inspiration' (*ilham*) and are angelic, and blameworthy which is 'whispering' (*waswasa*) and are satanic. Satan and Angel thus whisper the man mutually:

There are two impulses in the self, one from an angel which calls towards good and confirms truth; whoever finds this let him know it is from God and praise Him. Another impulse comes from the enemy which leads to doubt and denies truth and forbids good; whoever finds this, let him seek refuge in God from the accursed devil (*Sunan Thirmidhi*, hadith 2988).

The divine element is guided by reason (*al-aql*) while the satanic element is guided by appetite (*ash-shawwah*). Man is prone to err yet under the control of reason one's heart could take abode in angelic influence. According to Muhammad al-Ghazali (1058-1111 C.E.), the Angel stands for the overflowing of benefit, the bestowal of knowledge, the unveiling of truth, the promise of reward, and the ordering of the good. It is success (*tawfiq*) against disappointment (*khidhlan*), whereas Satan's business is to be against all this (al-Ghazali, 1982, 3:27). The last Messenger of God (upon him be peace and blessings) once drew a straight line in the sand and said:

This is God's way, he went on to draw several lines forking away from it and stated about Iblis's effort to persuade the man into taking any of these. With this he recited from the Quran: Verily this is My Path, straight and simple. Embark on this and not to others, because these roads will take you away from God (Qur'an Ch Al-Anaam: 153.) (Musnad Ahmed, 3: 317)

In Islam the appointed *djinn* comrade is called *Qarīn*, who is assigned to every human being at the time of birth and his sole job is to seduce and distract man from *Haqq* (Sahih Muslim, 1998, hadith 7108). So is our *Qarin* powerful enough to take over our innate nature which demands submission? God the Almighty says:

His comrade saith: Our Lord! I did not cause him to rebel, but he was (himself) far gone in error. Qur'an (Ch Al-Qaf: 27).

The devil assigned to seduce him will say: My lord! It was not me who seduced him at the beginning, but it was he himself who preferred blindness to guidance. So, I helped him achieve his goal through seduction. Man's heart is equally susceptible and consequently affected by both angelic and satanic forces. Satan can prompt evil upon the heart within the space given to it by the Self, for Satan itself has no control over it. This brings to mind Hakim Tirmidhi's (820-910 C.E.) words that it is God's mercy indeed that He did not give control of heart to *nafs*. (Hakim Tirmidhi, 2004,13).

We do not usually acknowledge what's happening and what's the force that is operating in us or on us, which veils the perception from knowing Essence. So much so that it has turned into cancer in us. Just as the cancer begins with the group of cells within a community that fail to communicate with conscious signal of the organism, it is happening with in us. Those cells begin to grow out of control and spread into the area of other organism. This very disease is evident in us if not physically, spiritually: the cancer of the dominance of false ego and our divorce from nature. It is the ego that we confuse with our true being and keep doing mistake over mistake in its guise.

Ego has a bad name, a terrible foe characterized as the devil, the temper and the spoiler. God says: "Have you seen the one who chooses for his god his own lust?" and "He followed his own lust. Therefore his likeness is as the likeness of a dog; if you attack him he panteth with his tongue out, and if you leave him he panteth with his tongue out" (Qur'an Al-Araf: 176) and about the person who controlled the passion of his ego God says: "But as for him who feared to stand before his Lord and restrained his soul from lust, Lo! The garden will be his home" (Qur'an Ch Al-Naziyat: 40-41). If one probe deeply into the conflicts arising within oneself, one finds invariably that it is the aroused ego run amuck. Hence, it's been advised by the spiritual masters to avoid ego, for man cannot understand its tricks nor can he handle this wild creature. The ego should rather be allowed to slumber peacefully. It is one's conscience which must be aroused, for it is that God-given part of one's mentality which, in distinguishing between right and wrong, will never allow the ego to assert itself.

#### 4. THE CONCEPT OF MAN'S RESPONSIBILITY AND HUMAN ACTIONS

Beside the existence of evil in substance known as Iblis to mankind, the evil as an energy is in the will of creation. Man enjoys his high status among all God's creatures for the disposition he carries within him of both good and evil. He chooses between the two by his freedom and so is responsible for his deeds. But man created of haste tends to forget (Qur'an Ch 21: 37), his heart changes and his will weakens. Something similar occurred and Satan misled them with deception (Qur'an Ch Al-Araf: 22).

Eve was created from Adam's rib and they both dwelled in Paradise where they were meant to "eat freely with pleasure and delight of things therein as wherever will, but come not near this tree or you both will be of the wrong-doers (Qur'an Ch Al-Baqarah: 35). Dwellers of Paradise forgot God's warning and ate of the forbidden tree. Adam and Eve sought forgiveness, acknowledging that it was their *Nafs* that fell into the prey of ignorance. God Himself taught them the words of forgiveness (Qur'an Ch Al-Baqarah: 37) that goes:

"Our Lord, we have wronged ourselves and if you forgive us not, and bestow not upon us your mercy, we shall be losers" (Qur'an Ch Al-Araf: 23).

God creates in man the *ikhtiyar*, that is, power to act along with the ability to make a choice between the right and wrong. God is the creator (*khaliq*) of actions and man is the acquirer (*muktasib*). An event initiated by God's permit is completed after the correspondence with the involvement of man's choice. Acquisition (*iktisab*) means that man is responsible for whatever he does and so will be answerable for his deeds.

#### 5. FREEDOM AND DESTINY UNIFIED

Determinism and free will, or *taqdir* and *taklif* in Arabic, is related to divine attribute of Power and Will. Life is governed by one universal scheme, *al-tadbir al wahdani*, determined by God's Eternal Will and Power. Nothing can go at the slightest variance with it.

As man has free will, he has the capacity to decide for himself. In some people this ability is stifled due to two reasons. It is either due to his arrogance or because of his sinful past. This is why he is kept on being educated and instructed. Prophets over prophets, some higher in ranks than others, were sent to for the purpose. And it doesn't end with them, God says in Qur'an:

"Let there rise from among you a band of people who should invite to righteousness, enjoin good and forbid evil: such are the one, who shall be successful" (Qur'an Ch Al-Imran: 104).

It is due to the free-will that man is able to achieve the three stages of spirituality and morality. The three stages being, first is the self that incites the evil (the passion addicted to evils, dominated by the pleasure principle taking no account of reality or social norms) (Arabic: *an-nafs al ammarah*) to the reproaching self (Arabic: *an-nafs al-lawwamah*) (because it reproaches for negligence in the duties) and from this to self at peace (Arabic: *an-nafs al-mutamainah*). The first stage is purely evil. Man cannot distinguish right from wrong. The light of reason does not enter here. The second stage is a conflict between good and evil. Sometimes man is under the influence of good and sometimes of evil. He does both good and bad deeds in this stage. Man's energies turns into *Nafs al-'Ammarah bi 'l-su'* or passion addicted to evils if it gives up the protest and surrenders herself in obedience to the call of passions. It then is with the gathering of Satan. In some translations it is rendered by carnal soul (Abu 'l-Hayyan, 1929, 325). Those who succeed to render it under control, reach the third stage where the man gets out of the evil influences. Man loses the sight of first

two stages and the higher self or the consciousness that is his true inner being becomes his master (Qur'an Ch Al-Fajr: 27-30).

The freedom and destiny of God, there is no contradiction between these two. Man's freedom is understood through the concept of *taklif* (responsibility). It is the responsibility of accepting the Trust (*amanah*) of God given to him in the phenomenal world (*Musnad Ahmad*, hadith 15312, 1:251) that provides man to choose between various alternatives. The destiny set by God for man is flexible enough to provide man with freedom, creativity and scheme by which the man chooses his course. Man, through his knowledge and endless capabilities provided by God, can mold his persona and his ambience. It is up to man how he wants to use these energies because destiny provides man with enormous opportunities to mold him into a better person and tread the path to excellence. But, human destiny however has the limitations itself imposed by God. He owes his existence to God. This is because God is the ultimate power behind every bit of move. The freedom and creative energies are bestowed by God to man otherwise he could do nothing. Man is destined to express his possibilities granted by God.

God who has absolute freedom limits man's freedom. We are not free like God but his freedom makes him unique and high in his status. Man is free to select different alternatives but he is responsible for his deeds.

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