



Why Do People Suffer? God's Existence & the Problem of Evil

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In the name of Allah, the Most Merciful, the Grantor of Mercy

*This essay argues that the existence of evil offers neither a logical nor probable case against God's existence and that Islam offers a comprehensive theodicy: that is, a systematic solution to the problem of evil. This paper is essentially a summary and translation of Dr. Sami Ameri's phenomenal research on the subject.*¹

The Immovable Boulder

Evil's centrality in atheist discourse is no secret. George Büchner, a German atheist and poet, calls the problem of evil the "immovable boulder of atheism."² During a 2013 debate entitled "The Origin of Life: Evolution or Design," atheist Michael Ruse stated clearly that the sole reason behind his refusal to believe in God was the problem of evil. In his famous work, *There is a God: How the World's Most Notorious Atheist Changed His Mind*, former atheist Antony Flew asserts that, particularly in the western world, the problem of evil represents the most commonly cited argument for atheism.³ This is not only true in intellectual spheres. In a contemporary study, Americans were asked, "If you could ask God only one question, and you knew He would give you an answer, what would you ask?" The most common question was, "Why is there pain and suffering in the world?"⁴

There have been two major schools among theists when it comes to the problem of evil. The first camp—which, according to Timothy J. Keller (a Christian), most Christian philosophers belong to—argues that the existence of evil does not disprove God's existence. In other words, they correctly point out the logical problem with arguing that the existence of evil is proof for atheism.⁵ The second camp is that of the theodacists; those who go beyond and also try to understand God's Wisdom in allowing evil to exist.

¹ Sami Ameri, *Mushkilat ash-Sharri wa Wujūdillāh* (London: Takween Studies and Research, 2016).

² Randy Alcorn, *If God is Good: Faith in the Midst of Suffering and Evil* (Colorado Springs, Colorado: Multnomah Books, 2009), p. 11.

³ Antony Flew, *There is a God: How the World's Most Notorious Atheist Changed His Mind* (New York: HarperOne, 2007), p. 13.

⁴ Lee Strobel, *The Case for Faith* (Michigan: Zondervan, 2000, EPub Format).

⁵ Timothy J. Keller, *Walking with God Through Pain and Suffering* (New York: Dutton, 2013), p. 95.

This essay presents the comprehensive theodicy of Sunni Islam, one that stems purely from our preserved sacred texts (the Qur'an and authentic *Sunnah*), as it is the distortion of previous scriptures that hinders many theologians from offering a coherent theodicy. Even within Islam, as William Montgomery Watt points out, it was only revisionist sects like the Mutazilites—who attempted to bridge between the Qur'an and Greek Philosophy with a hybrid theology—who found themselves grappling with the problem of evil in their literature; Sunni writings rarely did.⁶ The Sunni mind, which embraced revelation fully, had no difficulty seeing Divine Wisdom as weaving the threads of pain and suffering into a brilliant story; a story that harmonizes mercy and justice; a story that derives happy endings from pain; a story that sees that “immovable boulder” as a building block for one's spiritual ascent.

What Makes Evil a Problem?

Evil in the world has always been a problem, but it has only in the past few centuries translated into a revolt against God and religion. Why is that? What is different now?

Life Being Seen as Purposeless

The gradual reorientation of the Western mindset from the “purpose of life” to the “quality of life” was a byproduct of 18th century Europe's Enlightenment Period. This radical shift of focus, wherein peoples' means of living displaced the pursuit of transcendent purpose, is what eventually made life's frustrations increasingly unbearable. When the totality of existence is reduced to this life alone, and life is no longer seen as a means to a greater goal, it can be expected that ensuring immediate pleasure and avoiding pain would become the sole objectives—and unattainable objectives, for sure. In the words of C.S. Lewis,

For the wise men of old the cardinal problem had been how to conform the soul to reality, and the solution had been knowledge, self-discipline, and

⁶ W. Montgomery Watt, “Suffering in Sunnite Islam,” in *Studia Islamica*, 50 (1979), pp. 5-6.

*virtue. For magic [of olden times] and applied science [of modern times] alike, the problem is how to subdue reality to the wishes of men.*⁷

It is, therefore, no wonder that Western communities in particular, despite their many luxuries and comforts, have had the greatest difficulty grappling with the problem of evil. As Victor Frankl put it, “More people today have the means to live, but no meaning to live for.”⁸ Meaninglessness is what renders life a prison in which occupants frantically scramble between the walls of life and death, panicking from every sting. In a life without meaning, every pinch is an unexplainable—and unavoidable—random event that can only be classified in terms of energy and matter, and only represents chaos, commotion, and a tragedy.

An Era of Intensified Sensitivity

It is natural and understandable that the problem of evil would be amplified in any age among those who are particularly sensitive: people whose empathic hearts ache from a child's tear, an elder's weakness, and a victim's scream of pain. However, consider how the average person in modern times enjoys unprecedented luxuries allowed by technological developments. Consider also how medical advancements have resulted in the prevention of many diseases, pain management, and access for the disabled. While these developments have benefited human life immensely, they have also heightened our sensitivities and weakened our tolerance of pain and suffering. This is why most phenomena cited by atheists to depict the viciousness of evil are humanitarian crises which occur in medically and technologically less advanced nations, nations whose people still suffer from diseases and famines that have almost been eradicated in the West.

The Rise of the Ego

After the French Revolution, not only did the Age of Empires meet its demise, but centralized nations followed suit, and then even tribal affiliations and family bonds were sacrificed at the altar of the individual. Once the dust cleared from this global

⁷ C.S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (Harpercollins e-Books, 2014), p. 77.

⁸ Victor Frankl, *The Unheard Cry for Meaning* (New York: Simon Schuster, 1978), pp. 20-21.

deconstruction of relationships, all that remained standing was the human ego, now more monstrous than ever, for this demolition of society allowed even newer forms of individualism to reign supreme. Naturally, when people stop seeing themselves as part of a greater collective and begin seeing their own interests as paramount, the suffering and strife of others do not lead to empathy or solidarity. In a climate that begins with “me” and ends with “me,” evil is no longer a mere problem, but leads to a slow suicide in a deaf, uncaring world.

The Delusion of the Modern Man

The discoveries and breakthroughs of the modern era have deluded people into assuming they can fully understand everything in the universe, determine with absolute certainty what does and does not exist, and subsequently not hesitate to deny there is any wisdom to many of the phenomena around them. In *A Secular Age*, Charles Taylor aptly describes how western society's attitude towards the universe has taken an anthropocentric turn in modern times.⁹ In other words, the secular person now perceives himself as Master of the Universe, concluding that whatever his eye cannot see does not exist and that whatever his mind cannot recognize as wise must be foolish.

Challenging the Question

It is unfortunate to see many theists feeling cornered into the proverbial hot seat when it comes to the problem of evil, allowing the atheist to assume the role of the interrogator in the conversation. First and foremost, the link between “the existence of evil” and “the existence of God” must never remain unchallenged. These are two separate issues that should not be conflated. Many people assume that since evil exists, God must either be unknowing, uncaring, or incapable of removing it. Because God is understood to be Omniscient, All-Merciful, and Omnipotent, the assumption is that the existence of evil implies that God must not exist. However, even Richard Dawkins himself, the iconic father of New Atheism, states that simply imagining that God is cruel is one logically plausible solution to that

⁹ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2007), p. 373.

standoff. He writes, “But, for a more sophisticated believer in some kind of supernatural intelligence, it is childishly easy to overcome the problem of evil. Simply postulate a nasty god—such as the one who stalks every page of the Old Testament.”¹⁰ Certainly, monotheists would reject this option for good reason, but this does not change the fact that this Dawkinsian hypothetical debunks the overused false logic described above. Ultimately, the problem of evil is a problem for atheists. For believers in God, the existence of evil does not pose a problem, nor does it make them despair.

Atheists who question why evil exists also reveal numerous fault lines in their worldview. First, asking “why” implies that one assumes there should be an explanation, revealing the subconscious belief of all people that our lives have meaning. Otherwise, we would all just surrender to a nihilism that is indifferent to good and evil. Second, asking why evil exists reveals that we see ourselves as moral creatures, but this immaterial quality of morality has no place in atheists’ view that only what is tangible is real. Third, asking why evil exists reveals that one perceives evil as an abnormality and good as the prevalent norm. Therefore, before asking “Why is there evil?,” fair and rational people should ask questions like “Why does good matter?,” “What is good?,” and “Why is there so much good?”.

Questioning the existence of good is the far worthier question, for only after identifying the dominant principle can the exceptions to that principle be understood. People would forever see the extraordinary laws of physics, chemistry, and biology as incoherent if they were to begin studying these sciences with the rare exceptions that deviate from these laws. Likewise, atheists can never overcome the “boulder of evil” until they find the humility to concede that evil is the exception in a world of innumerable phenomena that are good, orderly, and beautiful. Consider the periods of sickness versus health over the average lifetime, or those impaired versus functional across the human race, or the moments when arteries flow versus clog throughout our lives, or the decades of prosperity versus ruin for the average civilization, or the centuries of dormancy versus eruption of

¹⁰ Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (London: Bantam Press, 2006), p. 108.

volcanoes, or the millennia of non-collision between planets. Where does all this prevalent good come from? Energy and matter swimming in a world of chaos and coincidence could never produce a world where the default is good. Ironically, scientific empiricism attests to this: the second law of thermodynamics states that the total entropy (degree of disorder or randomness) in an isolated system with no external influence will always increase and that this process is irreversible. In other words, organized things will always break down and dissipate unless something from the outside pulls them together. As such, blind thermodynamic forces could never have produced anything good on their own, nor made good as widespread as it is, without the Creator organizing these seemingly random, chaotic phenomena into the marvelous things we experience like beauty, wisdom, joy, and love. Only after establishing that the norm is good can we hope to grasp the exception of evil.

No intelligent person should deny the brilliance of a spectacularly engineered palace containing thousands of stunning rooms designed to tantalize the senses because a few rooms seem unpleasant. It would be ludicrous to claim that this wondrous palace is the product of rocks, steel, wood, and wires randomly smashing together simply because we cannot see the wisdom in the arrangement of those few rooms. In such a case, prudence would necessitate suspending judgment. Perhaps the person living there enjoys it this way, or perhaps it was there to remind him of his humble beginnings, enabling him to never take his blessings for granted.

Looking at our own anatomy and not just hypothetical palaces, evolutionists once claimed that our bodies had 180 vestigial organs—parts that had become functionless over the course of human evolution. Little did they know, this was a premature judgment due to inadequate research into their functions. Ultimately, this number continued to dwindle over the past century, to the point that some anatomists now believe that the function of every last organ has been identified.¹¹

These “vestigial organs” actually point us to another problem with the question of why evil exists. We assume that we understand all that exists in and around us, while epistemologists agree that people’s perceptions and even imaginations are in fact extremely limited. In *The Inductive Problem of Evil*, William Alston explains

¹¹ Thomas F. Heinze, *The Vanishing Proofs of Evolution* (Ontario, California: Chick Publications, 2005), p. 41.

how humans are firmly shackled by their lack of data, the crippling complexity of many phenomena, the obscurity of what is metaphysically possible or necessary, their ignorance of the full range of possibilities and values, and their biased judgments as subjective creatures.¹² In modern times, our unprecedented know-how should lead us to greater humility than ever before. Now more than ever, we can observe just how massively complex nature can be. A prime example is the famous *butterfly effect* in Chaos Theory; namely that “the fluttering of a butterfly’s wing in Rio de Janeiro, amplified by atmospheric currents, could cause a tornado in Texas two weeks later.”¹³ It reminds us how the most unexpected factors, over extensive spans of time, still have a connection that is very real.

The above is but one of countless examples that can be used to explain that evil is not always the product of some simple linear progression, nor even the natural laws that only the most highly trained scientists understand. Many times, it can be due to an astronomically complex interaction of factors that we cannot truly comprehend. Theists, therefore, have every right to challenge claims like: *a deer’s suffering a slow and painful death because of a forest fire is nothing but a pointless evil that can never carry any wisdom or greater good*. Although there may be various wisdoms behind such scenarios (explored below), it is clear that some evils are clearly set in motion by human actions and we may never attain a full understanding of the causal chain.

The Wisdom Behind Evil

The Qur’an and *Sunnah* do not simply claim that the existence of evil can be rationally reconciled with the existence of an All-Knowing, All-Powerful, Most-Compassionate God. They also affirm that there is discernible wisdom behind what may appear to be evil, and hence Sunni theodicy involves “**reason guided by revelation.**” However, while there exists profound wisdom behind every “evil” in the universe, we as finite beings can only understand these wisdoms on a general level. We should also understand that a Wise God would not reveal to us every wisdom in order to guarantee that the test called life does, in fact, serve as

¹² William Alston, “The Inductive Problem of Evil,” in *Philosophical Perspectives* 5 (1991), pp. 59-60.

¹³ Laura Nader, *Naked Science: Anthropological Inquiry Into Boundaries* (1996), p. 209.

such. These specifics should therefore not be written off as irrational, but rather suprarational (beyond our understanding), but this should not deter us from trying to appreciate why God allows them to exist. In simplest terms,

- 1) God is the Most Wise;
- 2) God's wisdom necessitates wisdom behind everything that exists;
- 3) God's wisdom necessitates that some evils exist for profound reasons;
- 4) God's wisdom necessitates that, for life to qualify as a trial, the reason for every evil cannot be immediately disclosed to those under examination; and
- 5) God's wisdom necessitates disclosing some of the main reasons behind evil to help brace people as they navigate the hardships of life.

Before diving into these main wisdoms, it must be said that one of the most foundational concepts in Sunni theodicy is that **pure evil does not exist**. Ibn al-Qayyim (d. 1350), perhaps the greatest Sunni theologian to write on theodicy, says,

*Evil, as an independent phenomenon whereby no dimension of good is involved, has no existence in this world. There is nothing in our existence that can be called pure evil, because every evil in this world is good from one angle or another. For instance, sickness harms the body from one angle, while from other angles tests patience, evokes resilience, and may even strengthen immunity. Most disliked things are usually this way; never void of some benefit or another for the human being.*¹⁴

This golden principle stands true both for naturally occurring evils and for evils committed by willful agents (humans/jinn). God allows them to exist because the good of their existence outweighs the good of their inexistence. For naturally occurring evils, consider how volcanoes are not pure evil, because they rejuvenate the ecosystem which makes life on earth possible to begin with. "Without volcanic eruptions and all they release, farming communities would not be able to grow

¹⁴ See: Ibn al-Qayyim, *Shifā' al-'Alīl fī Masā'il al-Qadā'i wal-Qadari wal-Hikmatī wat-Ta'līl* (Cairo: Dar at-Turath, 1978), pp. 380-413.

food, certain building materials would not be available, and our atmosphere would not have its oxygen-rich environment.”¹⁵ For evils committed by willful agents, consider how even Satan's existence is not pure evil, firstly because he was not “created to misguide people” but rather he arrogantly rebelled by using the will he was given. Furthermore, Satan gives God's devotees a target to push back against evil, encourages them to seek refuge with God from his snares, including pride and conceit, and so much more.

For this reason, the Qur'an and *Sunnah* usually attribute evil to the creation or their actions, because from God's full perspective, this “evil” which He caused to exist is predominantly good in actuality. For instance, the Qur'an states, **“Say, ‘I seek refuge in the Lord of daybreak, from the evil of that which He created’”** [113:1-2]. Elsewhere the Qur'an refers to God intending punishment in the passive tense, respectfully omitting the “doer,” while God intending guidance is expressly stated; **“And we do not know whether evil is intended for those on earth or whether their Lord intends for them a right course”** [72:10]. Elsewhere, Prophet Abraham (peace be upon him) is found attributing creation, guidance, nourishment, and healing to God, while attributing sickness to himself: **“He is the One Who created me, and He alone guides me. He is the One Who provides me with food and drink. And He alone heals me when I am sick”** [26:78-80]. Leaving no room for ambiguity, Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ; peace be upon him) would echo this required etiquette in a supplication, **“And all good rests in Your hands, and evil is not attributable to You.”**¹⁶

Ibn Taymiyyah (d. 1328) gives many examples of how this nuanced distinction involves more than mere semantics. He explains that although evil—as we perceive it—can be found in God's creation, there is nothing that necessitates that God have the same properties as His creation. For instance, God creating a human's complexion or a flower's scent does not translate into Him having that complexion or emitting that fragrance. Likewise, God creating people with unpleasant qualities, whether physical or behavioral, does not translate into this

¹⁵https://www.usgs.gov/faqs/what-are-some-benefits-volcanic-eruptions?qt-news_science_products=0#qt-news_science_products

¹⁶ Collected in *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim* (1781); *Kitāb Ṣalāt al-Musāfirīn; Bāb ad-Du‘ā’ fī Ṣalāt al-Layli wa Qiyāmih*.

ugliness being a quality of God.¹⁷ Ibn al-Qayyim adds, “When the slave commits an ugly prohibited act, what he did is certainly evil and sinful, and the Lord is the One who enabled him to be the ‘doer’ of that [deed]. This enablement from God is justice, mercy, and correctness, for Him making someone capable of acting [freely] is good, while its manifestation [in this case] was evil and ugly. By enabling, God has placed things where they belong, for that [granting free will] contains profound wisdom for which He should be praised. Therefore, this is actually good and wise and beneficial, even if what the slave does is a flaw, a defect, and evil.”¹⁸ In other words, God created beings with a degree of free will which they sometimes use to act in evil ways. In these cases, God is not the direct cause of evil, but rather the original cause of this instrument which was used for evil, and the One who permits its existence for the greater good.

With this fundamental rule of Sunni theodicy in mind, let us now explore some of these dimensions of “greater good” and “Divine Wisdom” behind the evil, pain, and suffering that exist in the world we call home.

A Reflection of God's Greatness

“Transcendent is He who created all things in pairs—be it what the earth produces and from themselves and from that which they do not know.” [36:36]

Creating opposites such as good and evil is from the perfection of God's Wisdom, and making them observable to us is from His Graciousness. Creating the night and day, the sweet and the sour, the hot and the cold, pain and pleasure, death and life, sickness and health, also reflect His Greatness and Perfection. Though the attributes of God are inherently perfect, not seeing them manifest in our world would render us less capable of recognizing God's Greatness. Were it not for the creation, recognizing God's quality of being a Creator would be more difficult. Were it not for God creating people who exhibit evil, recognizing God's qualities of Forbearance and Pardon, and even His qualities of Justice and Dominance, would be that much harder to recognize. If a king were to limit himself to just one

¹⁷ See: Ibn Taymiyya, *Majmū' al-Fatāwā* (5/123).

¹⁸ Ibn al-Qayyim, *Shifā' al-'Alīl fī Masā'il al-Qadā'i wal-Qadari wal-Hikmati wat-Ta'līl* (p. 361).

of the many actions he is capable of performing, this king would either be unaware of his own abilities, or unaware of the great benefit these actions would entail for others. As for the One with perfect Knowledge and perfect Ability, He does not restrict Himself to a single action or type of action, for that would be a flaw in His Sovereignty. It is from God's perfect ability that He both gives and withholds, rewards and punishes, uplifts and debases, honors and humiliates, empowers and vanquishes, accelerates and delays, benefits and harms. At the same time, it is due to His Wisdom that, because humans are not identical, they are not treated identically, for that would be contrary to His perfect Justice. The Qur'an is filled with censure of those who equate between very different things (like God and man) and those who discriminate between equivalent things (like skin colors), so how could God condemn something as a flaw and then be described with it Himself? Allah says, **"Or do those who commit evil deeds simply think that We will make them equal—in their life and after their death—to those who believe and do good? How wrong is their judgment"** [45:21]. Therefore, if God's beautiful Names and Attributes must be made manifest, and that is only possible with the existence of opposites and counterparts, wisdom demands that these opposites must exist. If they are absent, then God's Attributes would not exist, which is inconceivable.¹⁹

The Qur'an and *Sunnah* often remind us that God's unparalleled love and compassion for people are as great as He is. In many cases, it is none other than the phenomenon of evil which sets the stage for the manifestation of those Divine Attributes. Thus, all the following "wisdoms" are not isolated explanations, but rather are dimensions of how God's Love, Compassion, and Good Will for His servants lies at the core of every prick and every thorn.

Making Life Meaningful

"Blessed is the One in Whose Hands rests all authority. And He is Most Capable of everything. He is the One Who created life and death in order to test which of you is best in deeds. And He is the Almighty, All-Forgiving" [67:1-2].

¹⁹ Ibn al-Qayyim, *Shifā' al-'Alīl fī Masā'il al-Qadā'i wal-Qadari wal-Hikmati wat-Ta'līl* (pp. 439-440).

Tests by nature necessitate a person grappling with challenges and overcoming obstacles before being crowned successful. Should anything other than that be expected of our test called life? The benefit of understanding why we exist is enormous because faulty expectations are perhaps the single greatest cause of life's frustrations. When people reduce their expectation of God to "unconditional love," and then expect God to treat them as if they were His pets, they will forever be disappointed with a world that was never meant to be a hedonistic paradise, and will always consider anything that opposes their desires as evil. But when this erroneous perception is avoided, people can recalibrate their perspectives and become resolute for the uphill climb of their brief lifetimes. God says, **"Every soul will taste death. And We test you with evil and with good as a trial, then to Us you will all be returned"** [21:35]. Al-Alūsi explains, "We test you with that which is disliked and liked, will you be patient and grateful, or will you disbelieve and ignore?"²⁰ Elsewhere in the Qur'an, God says, **"Do the people think that they will be left to say, 'We believe' and they will not be tried? But We have certainly tried those before them, and Allah will surely make evident those who are truthful, and He will surely make evident the liars"** [29:2-3]. These verses are particularly valuable in the theodicy discussion, for they help us realize that being subjected to good and evil are not just a test of conduct but also a test of faith—a litmus test for doubts, not just desires. Through these tests, a person's loyalty to his/her convictions is revealed, especially when they find themselves unable to identify the wisdom of an event in the universe.

Especially when being tested with evil, when the hammers of hardship come crashing down, a person's mind and heart incline towards the worthiest questions about the realities of this world, its Maker, and their purpose in it. Put differently, it would be nonsensical to enter the examination room of life with all the answers in hand, and it is life's challenges that drive us to fervently search for those answers. Once we do, we not only find the One with the answers but find out that He Himself is the answer. Perhaps this is why the above verses begin a chapter of the

²⁰ Al-Alūsi, *Rūḥ al-Ma'āni fī Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-Azīm was-Sab' al-Mathāni* (Beirut: Dār Iḥyā' at-Turāth), 17/47.

Qur'an that ends with, **“And those who strive for Us We will surely guide them to Our ways. And indeed, Allah is with the doers of good”** [29:69].

It should be noted that, from the Islamic perspective, this test of striving involves retaining or returning to purity, not overcoming “inherent evils.” God created man with moral uprightness; **“We have certainly created man in the best of stature”** [95:4]. Then, God endowed us with the ability to discern good from evil [91:8], and sent us forth in this life for our mind, heart, and limbs to undergo examination [76:2]. If we avoid corrupt indoctrination and misguided inclinations, we will remain upright in all our affairs. God also endowed every person with a *fitra* (spiritual disposition) that resists the evil influences that seek to ravage the beauty of his original nature. Therefore, upright humans and their pure *fitra* are what define humanity in essence. As for those elements that incline us to evil, these are what make life an examination, but they only have an effect when we let the voice of the God-centric *fitra* weaken, and when its Divine flame is left unfueled.

Since life was intended as a test, this test would be meaningless without us possessing a degree of free will. Otherwise, how can our enactment of good be commendable or evil be reprehensible if we are like feathers in the wind, with no agency whatsoever? Alvin Plantinga, in *The Nature of Necessity*, makes the point that moral good requires the possibility of moral evil: “The fact that these free creatures sometimes go wrong, however, counts neither against God's omnipotence nor against his goodness; for he could have forestalled the occurrence of moral evil only by excising the possibility of moral good.”²¹ Evaluating people's commitment to moral good is the purpose of life and the reason why evil must exist.

Humility with God and deferring to God's wisdom constitute the highest form of moral good. Resigning oneself to the fact that one can only see pixels while God sees the entire picture is a huge test of intellectual humility. Accepting that you are like the ant on the carpet who sees the masterpiece it walks on as a chaotic jungle calls for the greatest dose of humility. Beholding the grandeur of God, admitting to oneself that you are unlike God, and expecting to have “blind spots” that render some evils mysterious, is the most basic test of faith in the unseen. As God says,

²¹ Alvin Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), p. 167.

“And there are some people who worship Allah on the verge of faith: if they are blessed with something good, they are content with it; but if they are afflicted with a trial, they relapse into disbelief, losing this world and the Hereafter. That is truly the clearest loss” [22:11].

Similarly, when the angels asked God about creating humans who would commit evil acts, they were completely satisfied with the answer that God knows what they do not. With humility and complete faith in God's Wisdom, they accepted His superior Knowledge: **“And [mention, O Muhammad], when your Lord said to the angels, ‘Indeed, I will make upon the earth a successive authority.’ They said, ‘Will You place upon it one who causes corruption therein and sheds blood, while we declare Your praise and sanctify You?’ Allah said, ‘Indeed, I know that which you do not know’” [2:30].**

Ibn al-Jawzi (d. 1201) says, “The mind has come to recognize the Creator's wisdom, and that it has no flaw or defect. This recognition obligates it to forgo [objecting to] whatever of this [wisdom] is hidden from it. Whenever a specific matter is unclear to it, it would hence be incorrect to then determine that the principle itself is invalid.”²² For instance, what possible wisdom could there be in damaging a boat and subjecting its crew to drowning? What possible wisdom could there be in a young innocent child being killed? In the story of Prophet Moses and al-Khidr [18:60-82], those apparently pointless evils were unveiled to show us the subtle strands of hidden detail in the Divine tapestry. This story demonstrates that we quite often cannot comprehend the ultimate wisdom behind apparent evils. Little did Moses (peace be upon him) realize that damaging that boat prevented it from being forcefully taken by a pirate-king and that killing that sinless child was out of ultimate mercy for both him and his parents, sparing them all a greater evil had he grown to maturity among them.

Finally, the test of life would also be meaningless if this world's natural laws were not in place since it is our recognition of coherent patterns—such as cause and effect—that compels us to engage our realities. If wolves were blind to lambs, and angels airlifted deer from forest-fires, and viruses magically slid off our bodies,

²² Ibn al-Jawzi, *Talbīs Iblīs* (Beirut: Dar al-Kitab al-‘Arabi, 1985), p. 85.

and pepper spray suddenly appeared on the eyes of every rapist, and paralysis happened to every shooter's trigger finger, and food emerged in the belly of every starving child, this "perfect world" would actually be quite flawed, for it would have no standing laws or causation patterns, and because its "malfunction" would constantly require God's interference. In reality, though, these laws set this world as it was meant to be, and are there in order for life to serve as a stage for the test of life. Events have to exist that call for confidently appealing to God in supplication, courageously rescuing those in danger, and selflessly serving those in need. It is true that the laws God created to make life possible, stable, and enjoyable, are the same laws that sometimes make life painful and uncomfortable. The melting of glaciers does irrigate the land and quench the thirst of people and animals but may also result in destructive floods. Lightning provides plants with nitric oxide but may sometimes fatally strike down a human being. However, in all these cases, God created a natural law that offers a far greater good for the world than the occasional evil it causes. That greater good includes, but is not limited to, the ability to engage a comprehensible reality (natural laws) and the evaluation of how our will is used in light of that reality.

Harvesting in the Hereafter

"And this worldly life is not but diversion and amusement. And indeed, the home of the Hereafter—that is the [eternal] life, if only they knew" [29:64].

When sizing up our transient lives in this world, measuring them against the life of the hereafter, the problem of evil and suffering disintegrates. What are 70 years of supposed misery measured against, not 70 trillion, but endless years of unimaginable bliss? Conversely, reducing our existence to this life alone is what negatively amplifies our perception of life's "unfair" moments. A Muslim sees the hereafter as an inevitable reality, one that dwarfs our existence in this life to almost nothing, as the Prophet ﷺ said, **"If Allah had considered the worldly life as worth the wing of a mosquito, an unbeliever would not be allowed to take a sip of water from it."**²³ Ali b. Abi Talib (may Allah be pleased with him) further

²³ Collected in *Sunan at-Tirmidhi* (2320).

depicted this moment of arrival in the hereafter, and how it will make this entire lifetime seem almost like a dream, saying, “People are deeply asleep. Once they die, they awaken.”²⁴

It is common to find atheists aggregating the incidents of evil in the world, piling them together to evoke the emotions of their audience, attempting to persuade people to anger against God. By appealing to emotion, they seek to highlight these pains and sufferings as if they were not exceptions but the rule. However, even if these manipulative tactics went unnoticed, a Muslim's evidence-based convictions in a hereafter would still suffice to counteract them. For instance, the Prophet ﷺ said in a profound tradition, **“The most devastated person in this world—from the people of Paradise—will be brought forward on the Day of Resurrection and dipped a single dip in Paradise. Then it will be said, ‘O son of Adam, have you seen any hardship? Did you experience any distress?’ He will say, ‘No, by Allah, my Lord! I did not experience any distress; I did not see a single hardship.’”**²⁵ This person will not be lying but will forget all prior difficulties with that single dip in ecstasy. In a flash, this person who was disadvantaged, pitied, and “wronged” in the world will become the object of intense admiration for billions of previously “privileged” onlookers; the Prophet ﷺ said, **“On the Day of Resurrection, when people who had suffered affliction are given their reward, those who were spared will wish their skins had been cut to pieces with blades when they were in the world.”**²⁶

Human suffering, misfortunes faced by the innocent, and the claim that “life is unfair” are all legitimate grievances—but only if belief in the hereafter is denied. The ugliest atrocities like those committed by Hitler and Stalin, or those perpetrated against Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the saddest crises like those of starving children collectively amount to near nothing when compared to everlasting life. The Prophet ﷺ would invoke God for that piercing insight, praying in many gatherings to be granted **“certainty through which You would**

²⁴ Mentioned by Imam Suyuti (ra) in his book *ad-Durar al-Manthura* (427).

²⁵ Collected in *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim* (2807).

²⁶ Collected in *Sunan at-Tirmidhi* (2402) and authenticated in *as-Silsila as-Ṣaḥīḥa* (2206).

ease for us the calamities of this world.”²⁷ For one who understands the eternal nature of the hereafter, being asked to “explain a child raped then killed” does not rattle them because they compare the ordeal of a moment with unending delight that enhances with time and never fades.

In reality, it is atheism that has to grapple with the problem of evil, not those who see this life with all its hardships as a shadow-world next to the enjoyment of the next life. The believer whose mind is illuminated by revelation understands that just as the dead earth is brought to life each spring, and just as we were unliving and came to life before birth, our death will not be our end but rather just the beginning—transitioning to a new life where every annoyance and pain will be forgotten. It is interesting how some people mock the pursuit of Paradise, but at the same time embrace painstaking years of study in order to earn a degree, to put some food on the table and a roof over their heads. To secure a home with limited walls (no matter how spacious), and some food for energy (no matter how delicious), we all consider it fair to invest and toil for years, yet some find it unfair to work for an unending unimaginable bliss. In reality though, no matter what ambitions are actualized here, what pleasures were secured, and what “evils” were avoided, one has not really come away with anything but a drop from an ocean. The Prophet ﷺ said, **“The example of this worldly life in comparison to the Hereafter is nothing but the example of one of you dipping his finger in the sea; let him see what he brings forth.”**²⁸

Therefore, although a mindful Muslim sees the problem of evil as making this life more meaningful, and hence remains immune to nihilism and apathy, he or she simultaneously sees the problems of life as seeds to cultivate their true life in the hereafter. **“So be patient with gracious patience. Indeed, they see it [as] distant. But We see it [as] near”** [70:5-7].

²⁷ Collected in *Sunan at-Tirmidhi* (3502) and authenticated by al-Albāni.

²⁸ Collected in *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim* (2858).

God Loves to Forgive People

“And ask forgiveness of your Lord and then repent to Him. Indeed, my Lord is Merciful and Affectionate” [11:90].

Far from being distant or indifferent, Allah (God) as described by authentic revelation loves to give and forgive, even those who continue to get and forget. He tells us in the Qur'an how He loves to purify His servants [2:222], and His Prophet ﷺ informed us that God is more merciful with people than any mother is with her newborn,²⁹ and that He is more delighted with a servant's repentance than someone lost in the desert finding another chance at life after being certain that his demise was imminent.³⁰ How can God's reaction to those who defied Him be unfathomable joy at their redemption? Simply put, that is His unique Sublime Nature. For this reason, He infuses every last sinner with hope by declaring, **“Say [O Prophet], “O My servants who have exceeded the limits against their souls! Do not lose hope in Allah's mercy, for Allah certainly forgives all sins. Indeed, it is He Who is the All-Forgiving, Most Merciful”” [39:53].**

But for this forgiveness to take place, there must exist sins and sinners. If Allah wished for humanity to be sinless angels, that would not have been difficult for Him, but who then would these beautiful Divine traits envelop? Who would God redeem, and who would be mended after breakage by the Most Merciful? The Prophet ﷺ alluded to this very point when he said, **“Were you not to sin, Allah would do away with you and bring about a people who sin and seek forgiveness and are forgiven.”**³¹

“Evils” also serve as a cleansing mechanism for overlooked wrong, and what some scholars call the (relatively) minor sins. The Prophet ﷺ said, **“Trials will continue to befall the believing man and woman, with regard to themselves, their children, and their wealth, until they meet Allah with no sin on them.”**³² Another narration elaborates, **“No fatigue, nor disease, nor anxiety, nor sadness,**

²⁹ Collected in *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* (5653) and *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim* (6912).

³⁰ Collected in *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* (6309) and *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim* (2747).

³¹ Collected in *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim* (2749).

³² Collected in *Sunan at-Tirmidhi* (2399) and authenticated in *as-Silsila as-Ṣaḥīḥa* (2280).

nor pain, nor distress befalls a Muslim, even if it were the prick he receives from a thorn, but that Allah expiates some of his sins for that.”³³ The Prophet ﷺ similarly stated that it was from God's mercy to the believers in particular that they will confront many devastating times; **“This nation of mine is a nation [that enjoys distinct] mercy; it has no torment in the hereafter but rather its torment is only in this world: tribulations, earthquakes, killing, and afflictions.”**³⁴

In his book *Ḥādī al-Arwāḥ*, Ibn al-Qayyim explains the therapeutic function of pain in this world and the next, saying:

*The wisdom of Allah necessitated that He appoint an appropriate remedy for every disease, and remedying the misguided requires the most difficult remedies. A compassionate doctor may cauterize the sick person, searing him with fire over and over again, in order to remove the foul elements that sabotaged his natural state of health. And if he believes that amputating the limb is better for the sick person, he severs it, causing the most severe pain. This is the fate which Allah destined for eliminating extraneous elements which undermine good health against a person's will, so what about when the person willfully chooses to admit toxic elements into his pure soul? When an intelligent person reflects on the laws of Allah (the Blessed and Exalted), His destined decree in this world, and His reward and punishment in the hereafter, he finds them perfectly suitable, appropriate, and interconnected. This is because it is all sourced in perfect knowledge, impeccable wisdom, and overarching mercy. And indeed, He—the Glorified—is the True Supreme King, and His Kingship is one of mercy, graciousness, and justice.*³⁵

Some may argue that a doctor would readily remove the painful element of treatment if he could, so why does God not purify souls without pain? What Ibn

³³ Collected in *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* (5641, 5642).

³⁴ Collected in *Sunan Abū Dāwūd* (4278) and authenticated in *as-Silsila as-Ṣaḥīḥa* (959).

³⁵ See: Ibn al-Qayyim, *Ḥādī al-Arwāḥ*, pp. 756-761.

al-Qayyim suggests here is that it is the pain itself that serves to purify the wicked soul.

The major sins require a conscious repentance to guarantee forgiveness according to most Sunni scholars, but even then we find that “evil” is what generates in people that alertness and desire for repentance and reform. Without repentance, indulgence in sin continues to desensitize its doer and blind them from seeing anything but their next moment of prohibited pleasure. Just before they finish spiritually strangling themselves with these sins, and just before their faith bleeds its last drops, God rescues them from accelerating any further down that slippery slope to their doom. This rescue comes in the form of a Divine reprimand and sometimes arrives just before their lives expire in heedlessness, by afflicting them or those near them. Allah says, **“And we will surely let them taste the nearer punishment short of the greater punishment that perhaps they will repent”** [32:21]. On the individual level, consider a person dying a slow and painful death from a terminal illness; most would judge this at face value as utterly tragic. However, hidden in the crevices could be God’s greatest gift to that person: the gift of desperation. The medicines failing his body, and the loved ones streaming tears at his bedside, finally might bring forth a humility and brokenness in his spirit that qualifies him for salvation. As the Prophet ﷺ said, **“No one will enter Paradise in whose heart is a speck’s weight of arrogance.”**³⁶ In the concluding moments of his stay on earth, God insisted that he discover what he would never have voluntarily looked for without this illness. It is widely quoted that the legendary boxer, Muhammad Ali (may Allah bestow mercy on him), would say regarding his struggles with his final illness, “God gave me Parkinson’s syndrome to show me I’m not ‘The Greatest,’ He is.” He understood that he might have remained oblivious if God had not purified him of his years of haughtiness through this disease. To Ali, tasting powerlessness was more priceless than his boxing legacy, his monetary gains, and his struggle against unjust warfare—for he understood that all this would soon crumble along with his bones at life’s end. As for Parkinson’s, he saw it as the ultimate blessing in disguise, that might just grant him God’s love

³⁶ Collected in *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim* (91).

and company forever. In that vein do we understand the Prophet's ﷺ statement, **“When Allah loves a people He tries them.”**³⁷

Lastly, sacrificing a part to preserve the whole—when necessary—is something all prudent people find to be reasonable. The Qur'an tells us that God at times does this as well: **“So the people that committed wrong were eliminated. And praise to Allah, Lord of the worlds”** [6:45]. The reason for celebrating God's praises here is evident; by eradicating humanity's most wicked sectors (those who openly rebelled against His prophets and messengers), their cancer does not spread to infect the rest of humanity, and consequently bar them from the mercy and forgiveness He loves to extend.

Evil Brings Good to Life

“Had Allah not repelled a group of people by the might of another, corruption would have dominated the earth, but Allah is Gracious to all” [2:251].

Good and evil are two sides of the same coin, an inseparable cosmic pair that need each other to exist. Valor cannot exist without peril, forgiveness cannot exist without offense, and perseverance cannot exist without obstacle. The delight of satiety is only known to those bitten by hunger, and feeling quenched is only savored by those who experience thirst. There must be some manifestations of evil in order to attain the virtue of conquering them. As Hubert S. Box writes in *The Problem of Evil*, “Only with the possibility of failure do we deserve the reward for triumph.”³⁸ Hence, there must be some imperfection to humans, and to their world, to serve as a spark for the flames of good we are meant to kindle around us. God deemed that there must be sickness, so that we would pursue and enjoy health, and that there must be failure, so that we would be interested in accomplishment. We will savor nothing of our lives on this earth unless we also taste its bitterness on our tongues, and feel its regrets streaming down our cheeks.

³⁷ Collected in *Sunan at-Tirmidhi* (2396) and authenticated in *as-Silsila as-Ṣaḥīḥa* (146) and *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Jāmi'* (7460).

³⁸ Hubert S. Box, *The Problem of Evil* (London: The Faith Press, 1934), p. 56.

Explaining how pain is the container in which pleasure is delivered, Ibn al-Qayyim says,

*His wisdom (the Glorified) determined that happiness, pleasure, and comfort are not reached except by the bridge of difficulty and fatigue, and that they are not accessed except through the gates of hardship, patience, and enduring difficulties. For that reason, He surrounded Paradise with hardships and Hellfire with temptations. For that reason, He expelled His chosen one, Adam ﷺ, from Paradise despite having created it for him; His wisdom necessitated that he not enter it permanently except after difficulty and hardship. Therefore, He did not remove him from it, except to readmit him to it a more perfect admission. Only God knows the disparity between the first entrance and the second. What great disparity exists between the Messenger of Allah's ﷺ entering Mecca under the protection of al-Mut'im b. 'Adi and his entering it on the Day of Conquest. What great disparity exists between the pleasure and comfort of the believers in Paradise after enduring what preceded it, and their pleasure had they been created inside it. What great disparity exists between the joy of someone He relieved after affliction, and enriched after poverty, and guided after being astray, and collected his heart after its dispersal, and the joy of someone who did not taste those bitter pains. His Divine wisdom predetermined that hardships are the cause of pleasure and goodness, as the Most High said, **'Fighting has been enjoined upon you while it is hateful to you. But perhaps you hate a thing and it is good for you; and perhaps you love a thing and it is bad for you. And Allah Knows, while you know not'** [2:216].*

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A world without evil is like a world without good; neither possesses any meaning which a person would strive to actualize. Hence, when atheists demand a world without evil, they are simultaneously asking for a sterile world void of all good. Expounding on the notion of “no pain, no gain,” Al-Jāhiz (d. 868) writes,

³⁹ Ibn al-Qayyim, *Shifā' al-'Alīl fī Masā'il al-Qadā'i wal-Qadari wal-Hikmatī wat-Ta'līl* (pp. 448-449).

If evil were absolute, the creation would be destroyed, and if pure good existed, then the trial of life would end and thinking would cease. With the cessation of thinking would be the absence of wisdom, and once choices vanish, then discernment will also vanish and the scholar will become incapable of verifying, deliberating, and learning. No knowledge would exist at that point, nor would investigating remain possible, nor would harm be repelled, nor would benefit be secured, nor would patience through difficulty and thanks through blessings exist, nor disparity in eloquence, nor competition in ranks. The joy of triumph and glory of conquering would be lost, and no righteous person on earth would find the gratification of being righteous, nor would any wrong person find the humiliation of being wrong, nor would anyone with conviction taste the coolness of certainty, nor would anyone in doubt be plagued with distress and haunted by the unknown. People would no longer hope nor be consumed by ambitions, their souls would be stripped of all purpose, their minds of all their fruits, and all things would lose their value and due right.⁴⁰

The Gift of Gratitude

“And remember when your Lord proclaimed, ‘If you are grateful, I will certainly give you more. But if you are ungrateful, surely My punishment is severe’” [14:7].

God preferring some over others has many profound benefits, and evoking feelings of gratitude is certainly at the forefront of those benefits. The worth of this feeling is many times underestimated, while in reality, it serves as the only escape from the endless frustrating chase of materialism that negatively impacts both our physical and mental health. As the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ said, **“Riches do not lie not in many possessions. In reality, true riches involve being content at heart.”**⁴¹ An even greater merit of gratitude is that it earns someone the pleasure of God, and not just momentary (or even a lifetime of) happiness. Since God showers us with an endless downpour of favors, devoting every wakeful moment to thanking Him is

⁴⁰ Al-Jāhīz, *al-Hayawān* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 1424H), 1/134-135 (with adaptation).

⁴¹ Collected in *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* (6081) and *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim* (1051).

only fair, and that is why living an attempt at thanks (Islam) is the dearest thing to Him which He rewards eternally.

However, noticing the value of gratitude and embodying it are two very different missions. As for the latter, few things can ever be as effective as experiencing hurt or deprivation in your own life, or the lives of those around you. Any honest person would attest to that, and this attestation is the answer to those who argue: why couldn't God just create illusory evil instead of actual suffering? Life being a simulated but unreal drama will not actualize its objective, because although a picture may be worth a thousand words, an authentic experience is worth a thousand images.

Therefore, the very real disparities between those ultra-rich and those dirt-poor, those with large families and dejected orphans, those fully mobile and those perpetually bedridden, are but avenues through which the gift of gratitude is thrown right into our laps. The Prophet ﷺ said, **“When one of you looks at those preferred above him in [this] worldly life, let him [quickly] look at those beneath him, for that is more helpful for you to not belittle God’s favor on you.”**⁴² Every single person can draw inspiration from this prophetic tradition, because, just as we may all notice people who are superior to us in certain blessings, we will always find those more disadvantaged than ourselves in one way or another. For those who see this world on a superficial level, these disadvantages are unwise and objectionable, while those who have more confidence in God’s discretion than their own see it as a treasure beyond measure. In fact, even the people facing adversity and deprivation have at some level a greater reason to be grateful than those spared these trials in life, because their test was simply to endure their ordeal, and that is far less difficult than the often failed test of appreciating one’s blessings.

Awareness of the Insignificance of This World

“O believers! What is the matter with you that, when you are asked to march forth in the cause of Allah, you cling firmly to the earth? Do you prefer the life

⁴² Collected in *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* (6125) and *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim* (2963).

of this world over the Hereafter? The enjoyment of this worldly life is insignificant compared to that of the Hereafter” [9:38].

Sudden deaths, horrific acts of violence, and natural disasters are but three of many ways God alerts people to the insignificance of this world. These tragic events remind us that life—no matter how long—is a journey that must conclude. In a blink and without warning, the blades of time sever hopes, dreams, and joys. These “evils” remind us that everyone on earth perishes, quickly replaced by others as if one had never set foot on its soil.

God says, **“Know that this worldly life is no more than play, amusement, luxury, mutual boasting, and competition in wealth and children. This is like rain that causes plants to grow, to the delight of the planters. But later the plants dry up and you see them wither, then they are reduced to chaff. And in the Hereafter, there will be either severe punishment or forgiveness and pleasure of Allah, whereas the life of this world is no more than the delusion of enjoyment”** [57:20]. This verse beautifully illustrates how farmers toil only to see it all crumble at season’s end. This analogy portrays how all this seriousness we see in the world around us today will—in an instant—be like aimless play and futile competition, except for those who invested it for yields in the afterlife.

We human beings quickly forget things for various reasons. One reason we “forget” is convenience; whenever impatience tempts us with instant gratification, this requires chasing from consciousness an awareness of outcomes. For this reason, God will sometimes interrupt the sweetness of life before we let our guard down, cling to its luxury, and forget our purpose. Lest we become deceived that we have been created for this vanishing comfort, God awakens us with “evils” and brings us back to alertness. As C.S. Lewis put it, “God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world.”⁴³

Similarly, Ibn al-Qayyim said, “It was from His Mercy (the Mighty and Majestic) that He blemished their worldly life for them and made it imperfect. This was so

⁴³ C.S. Lewis, *Complete C.S. Lewis Signature Classics* (San Francisco, CA: Harper San Francisco, 2002), p. 406.

they would not feel comfortable in it nor feel secure regarding it, and so they would aspire for the endless enjoyment in His abode and in His company. So in reality, He deprived them so that He would give them, and He tried them so that He would relieve them, and He put them to death so that He would give them [everlasting] life.”⁴⁴

God knows well the human tendency to slip into heedlessness and inactivity, and thus He sometimes jolts us out of our stupor. God knows that hardly anything can awaken vigor like tribulation, so He periodically invigorates our lives with some turbulence. Once awakened and revitalized, human beings realize the reality of their existence, and feel propelled with newfound urgency towards living for things greater than themselves. Hence, it is with these “evils” that the seeds of human excellence are planted, and people not only discover their potential and self-actualize, but move on to the profound station of self-transcendence: living with God, by God, and for God in this world and the next.

Producing Human Excellence

“If We had willed, We would have elevated him with Our signs, but he clung to this life following his evil desires. His example is that of a dog: if you chase it away, it pants, and if you leave it alone, it still pants” [7:176].

In the depths of human beings are wonderful characteristics that not only enhance our quality of life in this world but remind us of our profound status in it. However, these moral virtues are frequently shackled by the chains of comfort and complacency and only manifest during disasters and danger. During crises and earthquakes, the values of courage, generosity, fraternity, and altruism appear. People enslaved to their luxuries know nothing about their own humanness but its outermost shell, and are hindered from discovering their potential for anything beyond consumption. Trials like being an orphan, or homeless, or sleeping hungry have unearthed talents and heroics in so many admirable personalities around us. These trials carved in them the virtues of tenacity and perseverance, which in turn earned them access to the making of history. Think of the sharpest minds and

⁴⁴ See: Ibn al-Qayyim, *Ighāthat al-Lahfān Min Maṣāyid ash-Shayṭān* (Riyadh: Maktabat al-Ma‘ārif): 2/175.

greatest discoveries that only came to fruition through the expenditure of blood, sweat, and tears. Even in our personal lives, every disadvantage and failure breathes new life into our eroding resolve, allowing for its rebirth after the labor pains of the trial subside. Once this newborn arrives, it causes us to realize that our real problem was not huge dark clouds that haunted us, but our heavy eyelids that kept us from seeing the sun's radiant rays.

In his book, *An Irenaean Theodicy*, renowned philosopher John Hick describes how “soul-making” is the outcome of “encountering evil” in the world, explaining how a world without temptation or choices can never be an atmosphere in which human excellence thrives. How is someone imprisoned for 10 years praiseworthy for not using narcotics when he had no access to them during that span? How can a person be celebrated for avoiding deviance when deviance does not exist in the first place? In reality, life in the Divine plan is an uphill climb for the human being, whereby he or she ascends to greatness by traversing the thorny path and struggling against human weakness.⁴⁵

Regarding the pinnacle of this uphill climb, God says, **“Indeed, those who have believed and done righteous deeds, they are the best of creation”** [98:6]. Some companions of the Prophet ﷺ, like Abu Hurayra (may Allah be pleased with him), commented on this verse saying, “Even better than the angels,” and for an obvious reason; those inclined to sin but who patiently adhere to the straight path outperform the sinless angels who do not have the agency to depart from that path. Hence, once they are cleansed of their sins, and only their hard-earned good deeds remain, the angels will flock around their blissful palaces in admiration, as God says, **“And the angels will enter upon them from every gate, [saying], ‘Peace be upon you for what you patiently endured. And excellent is the final home’”** [13:23-24].

⁴⁵ See: John Hick, “An Irenaean Theodicy” in *Encountering Evil: Live Options in Theodicy*, ed. Stephen T. Davis (Edinburgh: John Knox Press, 1981), p. 46.

Conclusion

“But if the Truth had followed their inclinations, the heavens and the earth and whoever is in them would have been ruined” [23:71].

When considering “the problem of evil” as presented by atheists, one realizes that the demands of atheists are actually quite simple. First, they seek a populist god that serves the masses; a god that is undecided since the masses constantly fluctuate in their determinations of what is desirable and undesirable; a god that has no autonomy whatsoever except the capacity to fulfill wishes and serve the masters He created. In that sense, atheists reject believing in God unless He stops being God, and accepts not equality with man but subservience to man. Second, atheists seek a human being that lacks the faculty of being human: agency—one that cannot do right because they cannot do wrong; a human being that functions like the clock’s gears and robot’s arms; a human being that is reduced to a doll whose human emotions are as mechanically simulated as traffic lights.

In the atheist’s “ideal world,” there is no joy since there is no sadness, nor is their success since there is no failure. People would know beforehand the outcome of their actions, leaving no sweetness to triumph since there was never any possibility of defeat. No person would be deprived of anything, and so nobody would ever anticipate the future with excitement again. No person would be disadvantaged in any way, which means everyone would be molded identically, with no differences among them in their health, wealth, beauty, reputation, and intelligence. Interestingly, people living in the greatest luxury today, with the smallest margin of difficulty in their lives, are those who usually find life meaningless and resort to suicide. Similarly, elders who stop working at retirement and collect their pensions often find life utterly tasteless, once working hard to accomplish things and being driven by insecurity are a thing of the past. Hence, the “ideal world void of all evil” which the atheist demands is a world that is silent, dead, and empty; a world that is more tragic than all of this world’s suffering; a world we praise God for only allowing in the atheist’s imagination.

A Muslim, on the other hand, reflects on the universe to find that all of it points to God's Greatness and Wisdom while being cognizant that a finite creature like the human being can never fully comprehend the Greatness of God nor His Wisdom. Extending that to the "problem of evil," a Muslim's general confidence and trust in God's wisdom is sufficient, even if he or she does not know the details of how this wisdom plays out in this life or the Hereafter. Just as a Muslim does not deny God's attributes due to not completely grasping their details, a Muslim consistently treats God's Wisdom in the same way. A Muslim does not deny God's Wisdom precisely because they have the humility to accept that they cannot fully comprehend God's decrees. To demonstrate, let us imagine a Muslim standing over a sick person who is moaning in anguish. The suffering of any creature is undesirable, of course, but we say this might be an expiation for his sins, or a test of his patience, or a punishment for his crimes, or God seeking to immobilize him for a period of time so that he does not commit another act that will spoil his faith, or perhaps God is strengthening his resolve in preparation for greater opportunities that await him, or... the possibilities are endless. Though we may not be able to identify which specific wisdoms lie behind any given illness, we remain certain that there are unseen wisdoms behind every trial. A Muslim's certainty in this and solid evidence-based conviction in a God that is Most Wise informs their theodicy and yields the following conclusion,

This universe with all its evils, of varying types and degrees, is precisely what a believer expects of a God that is All-Powerful, All-Knowing, and Most Merciful; a God who created the human being as described by the Qur'an, for the wisdoms mentioned in the Qur'an, and the outcomes portrayed in the Qur'an. For that reason, a Muslim does not find himself in a theological dilemma or a hopeless void when confronting the problem of evil. Instead, he finds optimism in life, and sees it as a brief opportunity-filled phase of his greater existence.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Sami Ameri, *Mushkilat ash-Sharri wa Wujūdillāh*, pp. 219-220 with adaptation.