

Islamic Concept of Evil

Afeez Sufianu, Ayinde

profism77@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Evil is a wicked act or bad habit that may impede the growth of human and societal development. Evil means pains and sufferings. Evil is mostly conceived, analyzed and understood as a negative phenomenon, but some scholars especially, the stoics and mystical theologian conceptualized it as positive phenomenon. This discourse analysis of evil is at the domain of the theologians and philosophers. The main argument lies in the cause of the evil. The sufficient reason demands that all things must have their causes. Therefore, what is source(s) or causes of evil? Why is there evil in the world created by infinite good or absolutely perfect God? Epicurus long ago writes: Is God able to prevent evil in the world, but is unwilling to do so? Then he is not infinitely good; on the contrary he is malevolent. Is he willing to prevent evil, but is unable to do so? Then he is not omnipotent; he is on the contrary impotent. But if he is both able and willing to prevent evil then why is there evil in the world created by him? In response we have philosophical and theological (religious) explanations to the problem of evil. This paper intends to offer theological explanations and particularly, Islamic concept of evil. Islamic religion seeks to foster peace in the world by establishing and preaching total submission to the will of God. The will of God is follow from the existence of God. The proof of the existence of God pre-occupied the earlier Islamic philosophers, less or no attention was paid to the Islamic concept of evil. And this makes some scholars think or claim that Islam has no conception of evil. This research will analyse the Islamic concept of evil by exploring views of philosophers (especially the medieval philosophers like St. Augustine, St. Thomas Aquinas etc) on conception of evil and narrow it down to Islamic perspectives.

Keywords: evil, Islam, God (Allah), Philosopher, theologian

INTRODUCTION

Evil has been for long an issue in philosophy and religion. Islamic religion argued and agreed that evil is not from God, but from human being with or without influence of Satan. Whatever calamity that comes from God is not to be conceived as evil, but a test to elevate ones' faith. I know what will immediately comes ones' mind is that does God has no fore-knowledge to

know ones faith instead of testing us with calamity? Testing us doesn't mean he is not all-knowing, but just like a teacher or lecturer that fore-known the capacity of his students till went on to test them. Human being is endowed with free-will to choose and act rightly. If human beings use his free-will to act contrary to the will of God, then he is not only committing sin but also engaging in evil act. Just as man has freewill so as God has will. The will of God is prior and superior to man's freewill. Whatever God wills to be and not to be must be in line as God wills it. God says in Quran 36v82-83: "His command, when he intends (wills) a thing is only to say to it "Be" and it is.

For this, around 8th century the first notable Islamic Philosophers, Abu-Yusuf Ya'qub Ibo Ishaq Al-kindī "asserted that the first being was created by the sheer act of God's will (Borchert 275:755). Evil emerges when the will of man is against the will of God. God says "or do those who commit evil deed think that we shall make them equal to those who believe and do righteous deeds that their living and dying would be equal? Evil indeed is their judgment" (Q45:21). This indeed implies evil begotten evil, whether the judgment takes place here or hereafter. This also proof that God is aware of evil in the world contrary to Aristotle that say God has no knowledge of the evil in the world. If we claim that God knows there is evil in the world then why is he not stop it? Does He just want things created by him to suffer? Is evil really design or decree by God? In line with this, the stoics say "Good and evil designs are useful and complementary. This means that even evil too is useful; it is part of the universal plan and it makes us own contributions towards the order and harmony of the universal, in accordance with the laws of nature" (Joseph Omoregbe, 1993:35).

The Stoics' view is seemingly Islamic conception of evil whereas, it is not limited to it. Why Islam is not limited to the conception of evil as complement of good? This is because evil is frowned at and punishable by Islamic law. That evil is complement of good is narrow and perspectival in Islamic view. Islamic induction did not only see evil as a complementary phenomenon. If it is conceived as complementary; how would Satan act towards God and against man be express?

Satan (Iblis) says in the Quran: "I shall make evil alluring to them and I shall lead them all astray" (Q 15 v 39). In this case Islam did not conceived evil as complement of good. It is a destructive act that aims to ruins and runs man down from his primitive assignment. Man's primary assignment is to worship God and do good. Doing good is worshiping God and worshiping God is submission to God's will. Total submission to the will of God is the

ultimate aim of Islam. God says “And they were not enjoined but to worship God alone in sincere devotion, and with purity of faith, and to establish prayers, and to pay alms, surely this is the faith of the upright nation... But those who believe and do righteous deeds are the best of all creatures” (Q 97 v 5 – 7). So doing evil which is contrary to righteous deeds (goodness to self and others), blot out our best. If we cannot explore our best, then we cannot have peaceful and evil free society. Thus, calamities, pains, suffering, wickedness, vice, immoral, harmful, injurious, wrong and bad acts abound in different styles.

Man’s weakness or inability to control his free will in accordance to God’s wills is on one hand the source of evil and on the other hand, man’s failure to resist against Satan (who has promised to make evil alluring and make man go astray ref. Q 15 v 39) are the cause of evil according to Islamic conception of evil. The disparity between man’s free will and God’s will lead to moral evil, while the antagonism between man and Satan lead to metaphysical evil. God says: ‘Shaitan (Satan) threatens you with poverty and orders you to commit Fah Sha’ (evil deeds, illegal sexual intercourse, sins) whereas Allah promises you forgiveness from Himself and Bounty, and Allah (God) is All – sufficient for His creatures’ needs, All – knower” (Q 2 v 268).

Moral evil is a disparity between God’s will and man’s Will and Metaphysical evil is super power evil of Satan over man. That is, Satan transcendental ability to deceive man to do evil. Then how can we account for physical evil? Physical evil according to Internet Catholic encyclopedia of philosophy includes all that causes harm to man, whether by bodily injury, by thwarting his natural desires, or by preventing the full development of his powers, either in the order of nature directly, or through the various social conditions under which mankind naturally exists. Physical evils directly due to nature are sickness, accident, death etc... are congenital forms of evil each vary in character and degree according to natural disposition and social circumstances”. It is crystal clear from this catholic explanation that physical evil is caused by natural and social circumstances. If we say natural we mean as it is influenced by nature. Nature is an occurrence without man’s influence. And if man cannot influence nature, then God did. Therefore, God control nature. In other words, if physical evil depends on natural disposition, then God cause physical evil. But on the contrary Islamic view holds that God is not the cause of physical evil. It is man that causes physical evil. Meaning that, physical evil can only be limited to social circumstances. Social circumstances is how man organizes and control his society. God says “and when we cause mankind to taste of mercy,

they rejoice therein; but when some evil afflicts them because of (evil deeds and sins) that their (own) hands have sent forth behold, they are in despair” (Q 30 v 36). God stressed further that “Evil (sins and disobedience to Allah) has appeared on land and sea because of what the hands of men have earned (by oppression and evil deeds), that the (Allah) may make them taste a part of that which they have done, in order that they may return (by repenting to Allah, and begging His pardon)”. In other words, Islam has no conception of natural evil. Even death as natural disaster is not natural evil. It is good and evil of man that causes it. When man does good or evil, he is expected to return to his God for reward. For this to be possible God brings death.

"Blessed is He in Whose Hand is the dominion, and He is Able to do all things. Who has created death and life, that He may test you which of you is best in deed. And He is the All-Mighty, the Oft-Forgiving"(67:1-2).

God permit natural disaster or calamity to caution man to desist from evil act and to be firm with goodness. Islamically, this amounts to say both good and evil are from God, but not caused by God. This can be further expressed that evil cannot be totally exonerated from God, because he says *"Blessed be He in whose hand is the dominion; and he is able to do all things" (Q 67:1).*

If evil cannot be totally exonerated from God, then what kind of evil emerges from God? Why and how evil emerges from God? In this response, we will examine briefly some various philosophers and theologians' conceptions of evil and narrow it to Islamic conceptions of evil.

Conception of Evil

Theodicy is the word developed by Leibniz to explain the problem of evil. In his book *"Theodicy Essays on the Goodness of God, the Freedom of Man and the Origin of Evil"* (1985) various objections were raised about the origin of evil. In all these objections he exonerated evil from God. That is, evil is not originated from God. Some of these objections and his responses are following (summary in formal arguments):

Objection I

Whoever does not choose the best course is lacking either in power, or knowledge, or goodness.

God did not choose the best course in creating this world.

Therefore God was lacking in power, or knowledge, or goodness.

Answer

I deny the minor, that is to say, the second premiss of this syllogism, and the opponent proves it by this.

Prosyllogism

Whoever makes things in which there is evil, and which could have been made without any evil, or need not have been made at all, does not choose the best course.

God made a world wherein there is evil; a world, I say, which could have been made without any evil or which need not have been made at all.

[378] Therefore God did not choose the best course.

Answer

I admit the minor of this Prosyllogism: for one must confess that there is evil in this world which God has made, and that it would have been possible to make a world without evil or even not to create any world, since its creation depended upon the free will of God. But I deny the major, that is, the first of the two premises of the Prosyllogism and I might content myself with asking for its proof. In order, however, to give a clearer exposition of the matter, I would justify this denial by pointing out that the best course is not always that one which tends towards avoiding evil, since it is possible that the evil may be accompanied by a greater good.

For example, the general of an army will prefer a great victory with a slight wound to a state of affairs without wound and without victory. I have proved this in further detail in this work by pointing out, through instances taken from mathematics and elsewhere, that an imperfection in the part may be required for a greater perfection in the whole. I have followed therein the opinion of St. Augustine, who said a hundred times that God permitted evil in order to derive from it a good, that is to say, a greater good; and Thomas Aquinas says (in libr. 2, _Sent. Dist._ 32, qu. 1, art. 1) that the permission of evil tends towards the good of the universe. I have shown that among older writers the fall of Adam was termed *felix culpa*, a fortunate sin, because it had been expiated with immense benefit by the incarnation of the Son of God: for he gave to the universe something more noble than anything there would otherwise have been amongst created beings. For the better understanding of the matter I added, following the example of many good authors, that it was consistent with order and the general good for God to grant to certain of his creatures the opportunity to exercise their freedom, even when he foresaw that they would turn to evil: for God could easily correct the

evil, and it was not fitting that in order to prevent sin he should always act in an extraordinary way. It will therefore sufficiently refute the objection to show that a world with evil may be better than a world without evil. But I have gone still further in the work, and have even shown that this universe must be indeed better than every other possible universe.(Leibniz,1951:187-188).

Most credit goes to Plotinus who first rationally explains that God is not the cause of evil, from his theory of emanation; he finds the best explanation of evil in his account of matter imperfection. He claims that all things emanated from the absolutely perfect being God. If God is absolutely perfect, why is there evil? In response, he says evil is privation of thing. It is not a thing. Therefore, it is not from God.

St Augustine claimed that the cause of evil is lack of love of God. Man is attract with the love of self, other person and physical object thinking that they will give him satisfaction and happiness. Happiness which is infinite in nature cannot be derive from finite things like self, others and physical except from infinite being. God is an infinite being. Therefore, happiness can only derive from God. How? He says the love of God.

Thomas Aquinas arguing in line with Plotinus and Augustine to say evil is a privation of being. “But Aquinas accepted Augustine’s solution of the problem of evil, saying that evil is not anything positive. God is not the cause of evil because evil is not a thing. Moral evil represents the absence or privation in something that in itself is good” (stumpf,2004:187). Islamic concept of evil, also claim that God is not the cause of evil.

ISLAMIC CONCEPT OF EVIL

Evil by nature is divided into moral evil, physical evil and metaphysical evil. Thus Islamic concept of evil will be presented in these three folds.

Islamically, God created all things and assign duty of worship and doing good to only Man and jinn. What God bestows on man, he bestows on jinn. If man claims to be intelligent the jinns too are intelligent. For this, it is erroneous for man to claim that he is the only creature endow with reason. Intelligence requires reason. Therefore, the jinns are bestows with power of reasoning. In fact God says: He has created things in pairs. Quran 36vs 36 says: “Glory be to Him who has created all the pairs of that which the earth produces, as well as of their own (human) kind (male and female), and of that which they know not”. It is a decree by God to create things in pairs in order to proof His oneness. In the verses that follow the above verse

God cited day and night, sun and moon as things in pairs. Since all things are in pairs. Then, good cannot be exempt to have no pair. The pair of good is evil. In between this pairs, there is line, this line is equity or just of God. If there is good without evil, God will not be just. And if God is not just, then greater evil may occur. Leibniz writes: God has a far stronger reason and one far more worthy of Him, for tolerating evils. Not only does he derive from them greater goods, but he finds them connected with the greatest goods of all those that are possible. So that it would be a fault not to permit them (Leibniz, 1951:100). If God does not permit evil, then is he unjust God? That is not the case that God is unjust, because God maintains equity among all things.

In maintaining this equity God says “And the heaven: He has raised it high, and he has set up the balance. In order that you may not transgress (due) balance. And observe the weight with equity and do not make the balance deficient. And the earth: He has put down (laid) for the creatures” (Q55vs 7-10).

Along this line the Prophet (PBUH) says: “The matter of the creation of a human being is put together in the womb of the mother in forty days, and then he becomes a clot of thick blood for a similar period. Then Allah (God) sends an angel who is ordered to write four things. He is ordered to write down his (i.e. the new creatures) deeds, his livelihood, his (date of) death and whether he will be blessed or wretched (in religion). Then the soul is breathed into him. So a man amongst you may do (good deeds) till there is only a cubit between him and paradise and then what has been written for him decides his behavior and he starts doing (evil) deeds characteristics of the people of the (hell) fire. And similarly a man amongst you may do (evil) deeds till there is only a cubit between him and the (hell) fire and then what has been written for him decides his behaviours, and he starts doing deeds characteristics of the people of paradise”(Bukhar, hadith 430).

From the forth going explanations, good and evil are ordained and seek to establish the unity of God. If good and evil are decreed by God, then why is there good reward and evil punishment? This is moral question and to be answer with explanation of moral evil.

MORAL EVIL

It is apparently clear that moral justification or judgment lies on the human free will or freedom. That is, freedom to make choice. Man’s ability to choose good or evil and right or wrong. The tendency of man to acts morally or immorally. Thus, if man acts morally, then

moral good occurs but when he acts immorally, then we have moral evil. Moral evil is the violation of moral standard or order in the society. Moral evil can also be refer to mismanagement or misused of the free will. The man's ability to choose or make choice freely makes it inevitable to be responsible for his action. Man on the contrary, does not want to be responsible for the consequences of his action. Since all things are created by God that is absolutely good, omnipotence and omniscience. Therefore, everything ought to be good. Why is there evil? Why are we experiencing pains and sufferings in the world created by infinite mercy and perfect being (i.e. Supreme God).

In response, Deboer writes concerning Islamic ethical teaching that "The responsibility of man as well as the holiness of God, who is incapable of directing causing man's sinful actions, had to be saved by asserting the freedom of the will. Man must therefore, be Lord of his actions... (Deboer,1967:45). That is, whatever good or evil that befall man is out of man's free will. God claims that he has gave man free will to make use of his rationality to choose what is good and abstain from evil. That He forces not. In Quran2:256 (i.e. chapter 2: 256), God says: "There is no compulsion (force) in religion. Verily, the right path (good) has become distinct from the wrong path (evil), whoever disbelieves in "taghut"(devil) and believes in Allah, and then he has grasped the most trustworthy hand hold that will never break. And Allah (God) is All-Knower". This shows that God created who does evil; it is not follow that He is the cause of evil. Doing evil distance man from God, the more evil one does the farther away from God and the more far away from God, the more one breaks away from the will of God. For detail explanation the metaphor of "sun" and "Car" can be adopted. The sun metaphor is an effort from Edward.

Edwards' first point is that God does not cause sin in virtue of any 'positive agency or efficiency but only by 'permission'. An example illustrates the distinction. The sun is the positive or efficient 'cause of the lightness and warmth of the atmosphere, and brightness of gold and diamonds' but, while 'darkness and frost, in the night' are 'necessarily consequent' on the sun's withdrawal, the sun 'is not the proper cause, efficient or producer of them'. Similarly, sin is an inevitable consequence of God's withdrawal; it necessarily 'arises from the withholding of his [gracious] action and energy'. Nevertheless, God is not sin's positive or efficient cause. It is therefore misleading to say that He is sin's author (Long, 2001: 82)

Also the cause of car accident is not traceable to the maker of a car. The same thing goes to the creator (God) of man is not the cause of man's evil. This is because God is good and whatever that comes from him must be good. Then why is there evil? It is similar to say if the will of a car maker is good and the car is made for man's enjoyment, then why accident? Is it inherent in the car or the maker deliberately put it there? To this, it is neither inherent in a car nor inflicted by the maker, but it is wrongly used of the car by the driver that causes accident. This may be due to over-speed or careless act of the driver concerning the functionality or operation ability of the car. The maker is like God, car is the freewill and the driver is the man. So whatever harm (evil) or good result from using the car (freewill) is for the driver's (man's) sake and not cause by the car maker (God). To this God says: "whosoever does righteous good deed it is for the benefit of his ownself and whosoever does evil, it is against his oneseelf. And your Lord is not all unjust to (His) slaves" (Q 41vs46). The justness of God makes him to also say: "So whosoever does good equal to the weight of an atom (or a small ant) shall see it. And whosoever does evil equal to the weight of an atom (or a small ant) shall see it (Q100vs7-8). He says further that "And the evils of that which they earned will become apparent to them and that which they used to mock at will encircle them. When having touches man, he calls to us (for help); then when we have (rescued him from that harm and) changed it into a favour from us, he says "only because of knowledge (that I possess) I obtained it". Nay it is only a trial, but most of them know not. Verily, those before them said it, yet (all) that they had earned availed them not, so the evil results of that which they earned overtook them. And those who did wrong of these [people to whom you- Muhammad PBUH) have been sent] will also be overtaken by the evil results (torment) for that which they earned and they will never be able to escape". (Q39vs48-51). Man cannot escape from his action. Hence, any form of evil that befall man which is not to promote his cordial relationship with God is cause by man. Therefore accident and any other physical evil is cause by man. How? This moves us to the explanation of physical evil.

PHYSICAL EVIL

As it is explained above that accident cause by man so also any other form of physical evil such as death, sickness, natural disaster etc. Inventions in science and technology testified to this. It is pointed out in the negative effect of science and technology that man experiences more terrible or evil thing.

Huxely “pictured a society of the near future in which technology was firmly enthroned, keeping human beings in bodily comfort without knowledge of want or pains, but also without freedom, beauty or creativity and robbed at every turn of a unique personal existence (Unah, 1998: 337). To buttress our point nuclear or atomic bomb attributed and increased physical evil.

Unah writes “the discovery of atomic energy is not just the gunpowder not the bow and arrow, not the spear, not war chariots of ancient isreal, not even the “markIV” and the hand grenade or the napalm bomb, but “cosmic fire...”(ibid, 355).

In another expression he says “Nuclear fission simply means that quantum states that as far greater than the exchanges of terrestrial energy is being excited; it means that an explosion that is twenty million more powerful than the most powerful chemical reaction ever experienced has taken place, and this means that everything on the earthy surface including the earth itself would have been reduced to dust (ibid). This means that the ruin of man can only come from man by their evil deeds. That is, it is not nature of God that cause physical evil. Before the discovery of science and technology, God has for long proof and tell us that man is the cause of physical evil. God says evil (sins and disobedience to Allah) has appeared on land and sea because of what the hands of men have earned (by oppression and a past of that which they have done in order that they may return (by repenting to Allah; and begging this pardon). Meaning that, God permits evil in order to take measure and control of man’s evil. It is not only the hand of men that responsible for physical evil, but their heart too.

Talking about the heart here take us beyond physical realm. In Africa, witchcraft is one of the typical example of this after physical. God says: Allah (God) will not call you to account for that which is unintentional in your oaths, but He will call you to account for that which your hearts have earned. And Allah is often forgiving, most for bearing! (Q 2 v 225). Man’s ability to use his heart to alluring evil, think that for the heart to be effective needs assistance from jinn and particularly the master of jinn called Shaitan (Satan). This can be betterly explain in Islam metaphysical concept of evil.

Metaphysical Evil

Metaphysical evil is the cooperation of Satan and man to spread or cause evil in the world. Man thinks Satan is doing good to him by alluring him to achieve pleasure of this world. Beside the pleasure of this world is momentary or deceiving. God says; “know that the life of

this world is only play and amusement, pomp and mutual boasting among you and rivalry in respect of wealth and children. (It is) as the likeness of vegetation after rain, thereof the growth is pleasing to the tiller; afterwards it dries up and you see it turning yellow; then it becomes straw. But in the hereafter (there is) a severe torment (for the disbelievers – evil – doers), and (there is) forgiveness from Allah and (His) Good pleasure (for the believers – good – doers). And the life of this world is only a deceiving enjoyment”. (Q 57 v 20).

The tricks of the Satan to paint the enjoyment of this world as everlasting happiness or greater good may be perceived as evil. But they are evil only for those who fall for those tricks and forget God: “Shaitan (Satan) has overpowered them. So he has made them forget the remembrance of Allah (God). They belong to the party of Shaitan (Satan). Verily it is the party of Shaitan (Satan) that will be the loser” (Surah 58. Al Mujadilah v 19). Satan (devil) can only add to our problem if only if we cannot control our hearts towards accommodating God by letting Will of God prevail. “[Iblis (Satan)] said O’ my Lord! Because you misled me, I shall indeed adorn the path of error for them (mankind) on the earth, and I shall mislead them all. Except your chosen, (guided) slaves, among them” (Q 15 v 39 – 40). That is, there is limitation to which Satan can mislead man. But some men misconceived this limitation and therefore engage in worshipping Satan in order not to mislead them. Whereas, God says: “Certainly you shall have no authority over my slaves, except those who follow you of the Ghawun (Mushrikun and those who go astray, criminals, polytheists, and evil-doers)”. (Q 15 v 42). In other words, the weakness of man to totally submit to will of God as a slave who solely dependent on God, has earned him to submit to Satan (devil).

In conclusion, Islamic concept of evil is that evil is mainly cause by man’s hands or hearts. Any pains or calamities that come from God are a test to elevate man to high level of honorable and humble servant. Servant of God, moving closer to God will distance us from evil and embrace and urge us to do more good. In other words, if our freewill that causes moral evil is identifying with God’s will, then evil will be at minimum. The physical evil as a result of inventions of science and technology by man will be control and we will have power over and above Satan (devil) to avoid or abstain from metaphysical evil.

REFERENCES

- Bloechi, J. (2003), *Religious Experience and the End of Metaphysics* (U.S.A.: Indiana University Press).
- Bukhar, 130 Hadith found in “Beginning of creation” of sahih Bukhar) Hadith 430.
- Deboer, G. J. (1967), *The History of Philosophy in Islam* - translated Edward. R. J., (New York: Dover Publications International).
- Eugene Thomas Long (ed.), (2001), *Issues in Cotemporary Philosophy of Religion*, (London: Kluwer Academic Publishers).
- Fred Berthold Jr. (2004), *God, Evil, and Human Learning A Critique and Revision of the Free Will Defense in Theodicy*, (New York: State University of New York Press).
- Gareth B. Matthews (ed.), (2002), “Augustine on the Trinity” (New York, Cambridge University Press).
- Jim Unah (ed.), (1998), *Philosophy for all Disciplines*, (Lagos: Panaf Press).
- Leiniz, G.W. (1951), *Theodicy Essays on the Goodness of God, the Freedom of Man and the Origin of Evil*; Translated by E.M. Huggard (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Limited).
- Ministry of Islamic Affairs (1419A.H. i.e. 1998), *The Holy Quran* (Madinah, Saudi: King Fahd Complex Press).
- Omogbe J. (2004), *Comparative Philosophy: East and West: A Comparative Analysis of Asian and Western Philosophies*, (Lagos: Joja Educational Research and Publishers Ltd.).
- Omogbe, J. (1993), *A Philosophical Look at Religion*, (Lagos: Joja Educational Research and Publishers Ltd.).
- Stumpf, S.E. (1994), *Philosophy History and Problem*, (New York: McGraw-Hill International).