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Why Do Animals Eat Other Animals? Mullā Ṣadrā on Theodicy and the Best of All Possible Worlds

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The problem of theodicy or God's justice versus evil in the world has been the subject of a long debate in Islamic philosophy. The tension between God's power and generosity to create an optimal world and the apparent imperfection of the world which He has actually created has led to the formulation of arguments that seek to safeguard God's omniscience and omnipresence against the charges of Divine injustice. Mulla Sadra approaches the subject from the point of view of his concept of existence and considers the actual existence of the world better than its non-existence. This makes the created world essentially good and reduces all evil to an outcome of its own imperfections, not that of God. By accepting Ghazali's argument that this is the best of all possible worlds, Sadra reiterates the existential optimism of medieval philosophy and regards evil part of the Divine economy of creation.

Key words: Mullā Ṣadrā, al-Ash'ari, Mu'tazilites, Theodicy.

The central problem of theodicy[1] revolves around a tension between God's power and generosity to create an optimal world on the one hand, and the apparent imperfection of the world which He has actually created on the other. Mullā Ṣadrā states this tension as follows: "The world cannot be better than what it is because if this was possible then [we would have to say] that the Creator, Who has a Free Will did not know how to create a world better than this. In this case, His knowledge, which comprises all universals and particulars, would be limited. If He knew [how to create a better world] but did not do so with His power, then this would contradict His generosity that comprises all beings."[2] The argument that the world in which we live is the

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1 The word theodicy, from the Greek *theos*, God and *thiki*, justice, is a shorthand for "the defence of the justice and righteousness of God in face of the fact of evil." Cf. John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1978), 6. Leibniz is usually credited with the invention of the term *théodicée* in its French form and uses it as the title of his celebrated defense of God's justice and goodness in face of evil in his *Essais de Théodicée*.

2 *al-Ḥikmat al-muta'āliyah fi'l-asfār al-'aqliyyah al-arba'ah* (cited hereafter as *Asfār*) (Tehran, 1383, A. H.), III, 2, p. 91.

best of all possible world-orders (*aḥsan an-niẓām*) God could have created is based on the overall assumption of the three Abrahamic traditions that God acts optimally and that His free act is the best of all acts. Ghazāli's celebrated phrase that "there is nothing in the world of possibility more perfect and wonderful than what already is" (*laysa fi'l-imkān abda' mimmā kān*) expresses the same idea by emphasizing the intrinsic perfection of the actual.

In essence, if this world has been created by an omnipotent and infinitely good God, then it must the best He could and would have created. Anything less would fall short of God's Power or Providence. Furthermore, from the point of view of God's act, what is actual is what is rational. It is, then, concluded that "the world-order as it is is the noblest, most perfect, and highest of all the possible orders in that no other order can be conceived as higher than it." Concurring with Ghazāli's statement and Ibn al-'Arabi's countenance of it, Ṣadrā calls this a 'demonstrative statement' (*kalām burhānī*), and declares it to be an argument accepted by both the philosophers and the theologians, whether they subscribe to a view of "eternal decree" (*al-qaḍā' al-'azalī*) or "renewing will" (*al-ikhtiyār al-tajaddudī*).[3]

The history of this debate among the *mutakallimūn* is well documented in Eric Ormsby's *Theodicy in Islamic Thought*, and there is no need for us to repeat it here.[4] It should be pointed out, however, that while Ormsby's study lists 43 authors and works from the 12th to the 19th century, some accepting, some rejecting Ghazāli's formulation of the problem, it does not mention Mullā Ṣadrā. In what follows, I shall provide a close reading of Ṣadrā's discussion of the best of all possible worlds argument in the *Asfār* and examine his attempt to reformulate the problem in terms of his overall ontology. By introducing his gradational ontology, Ṣadrā turns the optimal world argument *a la* Ghazāli into an onto-theological statement. I shall consider here six arguments Ṣadrā advances in defense of Ghazāli's position.

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3 *Asfār*, III, 2, p. 91.

4 Cf. Eric L. Ormsby, *Theodicy in Islamic Thought: The Dispute over al-Ghazali's "Best of All Possible Worlds"* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984). Ormsby's work takes Ghazāli's aforementioned phrase as its focal point of analysis, and concentrates on the *Kalam* thinkers. Yet such expressions as *ahsan al-niẓām* that we find in Bahmanyār b. Marzubān, Naṣir al-Din al-Ṭūsi and other members of the school of Ibn Sinā suggest that the debate over the best of all possible worlds is not an exclusively *Kalam* problem and has a rather persistent history among the philosophers. Cf. Bahmanyār, *Kitāb al-taḥṣil*, ed. Murtaḍa Mutahhari', 2nd ed. (Tehran: The University of Tehran Press, 1375 A.H.), 657 where he says that "this order is the real order of which there is no better or more complete order."

As will become clear, these arguments are closely knit together and show Ṣadrā's earnest interest in the larger question of good and evil. Constrained between God's infinite goodness and wisdom on the one hand, and His absolute freedom on the other, Ṣadrā oscillates between two models of creation. While the first model emphasizes God's innate nature to be good and wise in His Essence and acts, the second focuses on His absolute freedom. The first view argues for a self-imposed coherence on the part of God, whereby God is portrayed as essentially incapable of doing anything other than what is best and optimal. Protesting that this 'necessitarian' view puts limits on God's absolute freedom and power, the second view takes a 'libertarian' position and reduces all considerations of wisdom, justice, and coherence to God's will.[5] These two models of creation, which also lie at the heart of the notorious controversy between the Mu'tazilites and the Ash'arites, point to two aspects of the Divine, the first stressing God's 'nature', the second His 'will'. As we shall see below, Ṣadrā considers all these options, and makes use of them. At the end of his discussion, however, he takes refuge in a kind of blessed ignorance and admits man's lack of appropriate knowledge in such matters.

Ṣadrā discusses the question of good and evil in the Second Part of the Third Journey of the *Asfār*, the eighth *mawqif* of which is devoted to Divine Providence (*al-'ināyat al-ilāhiyyah*). Here Sadra's ultimate goal is to produce a framework of compatibility within which he can overcome the dichotomy between God as an omnipotent and innately good being and the apparent imperfections of the world which He has created. One way of doing this is to show the relative imperfection and eventual goodness of all created beings, and this is what Ṣadrā does throughout his elaborate arguments. I shall first analyze each of the six arguments and then give an overall evaluation.

Argument 1: "God acts optimally"

The first argument, which we also find among the *mutakallimūn* and the philosophers, is predicated upon Divine providence and wisdom. In this view, God acts not only freely but also optimally. This is something that emanates from His Essence and Nature rather than His Will per se. God acts wisely and optimally by way of necessity – a necessity that is called for by His

[5] I borrow the terms 'necessitarian' and 'libertarian' from Norman Kretzmann, "A General Problem of Creation: Why Would God Create Anything at All?" in *Being and Goodness: The Concept of the Good in Metaphysics and Philosophical Theology*, ed. Scott MacDonald (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1991), 208-28.

own nature. Since God is the most perfect being, what emanates from Him has also a degree of perfection. In contrast to created beings, viz., humans, essence and action are united in God. What this means is that there is no imperfection or impediment to prevent God from exercising His infinite goodness when He acts. Human beings may essentially be good or bad. When they act, all sorts of desires, greed, ambition, violence, jealousy, and so on get in the way. This is not the case with God. God's acts, among which we can mention creation in general, reflect His essence: "His being, by which His essence is substantiated, is the same as His being by which He acts."[6] And since God's essence is good, what comes from Him must be good. In short, God's providence and infinite goodness stipulate that He act wisely of necessity.[7]

A classic statement of this problem among the Greeks is found in *Timaeus* 29E-30B where Plato reiterates the necessitarian view of creation without appealing, as the Neoplatonists would later do, to emanation as an alternative model to *creatio ex nihilo*: "Let me tell you then why the Creator made this world of generation. He was good, and the good can never have any jealousy of anything. And being free from jealousy, he desired that all things should be as like himself as they could be ... God desired that all things should be good and nothing bad, so far as this was attainable ... the deeds of the best could never be or have been other than the fairest." The larger question of why God would create anything in the first place is addressed here through the language of self-imposed Divine necessity. Since we are not so much concerned with the general problem of creation as the creation of this particular world, I shall leave this issue for another discussion. What concerns us directly is the argument that God acts wisely and optimally – an argument predicated upon Divine Providence.

In his description of the Divine Providence as a principle of creation, Ṣadrā, following Ibn Sinā, refers to three qualities that God possesses: knowledge, causality, and contentment.[8] God does and must know what He creates.

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6 *Asfār*, III, 2, p. 106.

7 This, however, is a special kind of necessity and not to be understood as constraint or lack of freedom. Rather this is a self-imposed necessity. To avoid the pitfalls of conditioning God, we might change our phrasing and say that God does not choose what is right, but rather what He does is wisdom, rationality, and optimality. But this does not affect the relevance of the question we are trying to answer, viz., how and why God acts wisely and optimally.

8 Ṣadrā borrows his definition of Divine Providence almost verbatim from Ibn Sinā. Cf. *Kitāb al-najāt*, ed. M. Fakhry (Beirut: Dār al-Āfāq al-Jadidah, 1985), 320 and *al-Ishārāt wa'l-tanbihāt* with the commentaries of Naṣir al-Din al-Ṭūsi and Quṭb al-Din al-Rāzi (Qom: Nashr al-Balāghah, 1375 A. H.), 3:318.

This is the first condition for the optimal state of created beings. God's knowledge of things makes Him a cause of all things for their "goodness and perfection in the best possible way." Finally, God is and must be content (*riḍā'*) with what He creates self-consciously, i.e., through knowledge.[9] These three aspects of the Divine Providence are the standing conditions for anything that God creates to be the best and most optimal of all things. Divine rationality is thus built into the created order. In Ṣadrā's words, Providence *is* the name of the 'rational order' (*al-niẓām al-ma'qūl*):

> "The rational order, which is called providence by the philosophers, is the source of this existing order. It is thus the best possibility of goodness and virtue. On this principle, insofar as reasons and causes are concerned, there can be nothing random or haphazard. Rather, everything is based on a natural necessity insofar as the nature of all things is concerned."[10]

The optimal nature of whatever God creates is also confirmed by the fact that "God is the true being that has no goal (other than Himself) and no limit in perfection." Here Ṣadrā comes close to reiterating the Ash'arite position that God does not choose what is best but rather what God chooses is the best. But he then quickly recoils and charges al-Ash'ari with attributing to God a "will that is empty of wisdom and providence." The Ash'arite voluntarism, which takes a libertarian position on creation, reduces all reasons and principles to God's will, and makes the intelligibility of the present world-order utterly contingent, if not altogether dysfunctional. Ṣadrā's belief in the inherent optimality of things does not allow him to accept such a view.

Argument 2: "Being unconstrained, God is able to create what is optimal"

This is a revised version of the classical argument for God's essential ability to create whatever He wants. Formulated as an expression of God's freedom to create or not to create, this view places the emphasis on the 'whyness' rather than 'whatness' of God's act of creation. The revision takes place when we understand God's freedom not in terms of volition but rather in terms of unconstrained-ness and unlimited-ness. By definition, God is free of any material

[9] *Asfār*, III, 2, p. 57.
[10] *Asfār*, III, 2, p. 111.

limitations to which other free beings are subject. The special meaning of unconstrained-ness, however, stresses the idea that God's act of creation is not inhibited by any constriction, be it external or internal. In this view, God has "infinite power and is full generosity and effusion (*fayḍ*). Whatever has no matter has no need for a specific capacity (*isti'dād*). Nor does it have any constricting opposites."[11] Such a being, which is eventually God himself, does not face any obstacles such as "a limited capacity or an appointed time" in creating what is best.

A related argument Ṣadrā advances in support of this thesis pertains to God's knowledge of things. God not only creates what is best because He is unconstrained but also He knows everything in the best possible way. For Ṣadrā, God's knowledge of things does not require a subject-predicate relationship. It is not the case that things exist and God knows them *a posteriori*. Rather, God knows things through their "divine forms of knowledge" (*ṣūrah 'ilmiyyah ilāhiyyah*), and these forms exist in God and are ultimately identical with His essence. In the case of God in whom identity and action are united, knowing what is best is the same as doing what is best:

> "God knows everything other than Himself in the best manners because the knowledge-forms of things are His very essence. Things, therefore, have divine knowledge-forms before their ontological existence, and these forms have a divine sacred being [in God]. Whatever is a divine being is of necessity the most beautiful and magnificent. When the similes (*mithāl*) of these forms are actualized in the world of generation (*kawn*), they must be of necessity the most magnificent and noble of what can be in the world of generation."[12]

What we have here is a combination of two different sets of arguments, one concerning cosmology, the other epistemology. One reason we can speculate as to why Sadra gives these two arguments together is that he wants to place the optimal nature of what God creates in His power *as well as* in His wisdom. The notorious difficulties of opting for God's power and will at the expense of His wisdom and generosity and vice versa are well documented in the annals of *kalam*. We do not need to repeat this history here. But we will be well-served if we take notice of it as a background to Ṣadrā's overall purpose in the foregoing arguments and in the arguments to follow.

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[11] *Asfār*, III, 2, p. 91.
[12] *Asfār*, III, 2, p. 107.

Argument 3: "Divine Providence intends the optimal goodness of things"

This view, which is in keeping with Ṣadrā's dynamic conception of the cosmos, construes the world as evolving towards a *telos* from lower to higher.[13] The general principle is that "the Divine Providence requires that nothing be neglected but rather that everything reaches its perfection."[14] Furthermore, the goal of God's actions is "universal welfare and goodness."[15] For Ṣadrā, this is a universal rule, and serves a higher purpose, even when it involves force and coercion. In fact, he argues that the world has been created in such a way that it is bound to contain coercion, destruction, and contradiction. The world-order in which we live cannot be free of "changes and transformations that take place in the very matter of the universe, starting with the positional movement of the planets."[16]

In preserving its order, the world is subject to constant change and corruption. We can easily construe this as an imperfection of the natural order. But, says Ṣadrā, this is a necessary component of the way the world is. Extreme cold and heat, for instance, may not be the best thing for 'the nature of the world'. In fact, this often leads to temporary disruption and relative chaos. The coerced transformation of the world, however, is

> "caused by Divine mercy in that if the world had consciousness it would know that its movement away from this state of being, insofar as its present state is concerned, may be abhorrent to it. But under this abhorrence and constraint lies a great kindness whereby the world is transformed from these forms [of coercion] to a form that is nobler and closer to accepting life and Divine mercy."[17]

It is, I think, safe to say that what Ṣadrā is defending here can be taken as a revised version of the Mu'tazilite position on Divine Providence and causality. It is true that Sadra does not want to endorse the Mu'tazilites, because they do not shy away from putting limits on God's power for the sake of formulating a coherent concept of Divine power and wisdom. According to Ṣadrā, many ordinary people as well as some *kalam* thinkers, probably a reference

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[13] Cf. my "Between Physics and Metaphysics: Mullā Ṣadrā on Nature and Motion", *Islam and Science*, 1 (2003), 65-93.

[14] *Asfār*, III, 2, p. 59.

[15] *Asfār*, III, 2, p. 99.

[16] *Asfār*, III, 2, p. 92.

[17] *Asfār*, III, 2, p. 92.

to the Mu'tazilites, even though Ṣadrā does not mention any names, are mistaken in their view of what God can and cannot do because they "do not know the nature of incapacity (*'ajz*) in regards to the hyle, and thus attribute all incapacity to the Agent, the Wise, the Omnipotent, the Knower. They sometimes imagine this and [attribute it] to God, saying that He is not capable of doing many things."[18] To further explicate this point, Ṣadrā refers to three impossibilities which God is described as incapable of doing. The first is that "God cannot force Satan out of his domain (*mamlakah*)," implying that God cannot prevent Satan from committing his evil acts. The second is that "God cannot put the heavens through the eye of a needle," meaning that God cannot violate the laws of physics that He himself has created and to which the heavens and the eye of the needle are subject. Finally, the third is the violation of the principle of non-contradiction, i.e., "God cannot unite two opposites."

The examples cited by Ṣadrā are not arbitrary, as each underscores a particular aspect of the present world order. The case of Satan refers to moral evil, to which we will return shortly. The example of the heavens and needle is a reference to the established order of physical laws. It is also a reference to natural evil as opposed to moral evil, which we find in earthquakes, poisonous animals, storms, famines, etc.[19] Finally, the third case is a reference to the principles of logic and the autonomy of the logical order. Ṣadrā's answers to these questions are based on his overall belief in the necessity built into the present world order. Once the world has been created in the way in which we find it, then we operate within a network of relations and causal links that are necessary and inviolable. For Ṣadrā this does not impose any constraints on God's power and/or wisdom because He has willed this particular world order in which one cannot put the heavens through the eye of a

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[18] *Asfār*, III, 2, p. 97.

[19] At its face value, the distinction between natural and moral evil appears to be a useful one. Such natural evils as earthquakes and poisonous animals do not involve moral evil because they are beyond good and evil in the moral sense of the term. Moral evil is possible where there is will and accountability. In this sense, we can speak of two separate domains of reality for natural and moral evil. A closer look, however, reveals the interconnectedness of the two in that both natural and moral evil point to an imperfection within the world order in which we live. After all, God's legislative prerogative, i.e., His right to ask human beings to be good, is derived from His ontological prerogative as the Creator. In this broad sense, the divide between the moral and the natural is not as radical and clear-cut as we might think. Yet, we can still hold on to the idea, as Sadra suggests, that whereas natural evil is a necessary component of the present world-order, moral evil is not necessary and should be avoided.

needle. In this sense, incapacity (*'ajz*) is not to be attributed to God but to the incapacity of the eye of the needle. In the case of such impossibilities, it is perhaps theologically more proper to say that they cannot be done rather than to say that God cannot do them.

Ṣadrā's objections to the Mu'tazilite necessitarianism do not lead him to endorse the position of the Ash'arites either. One major reason for this is that he is not willing to collapse world-order into the arbitrary will of God that is "devoid of any wisdom." Instead, Ṣadrā tries to construct the present world-order with a sense of internal coherence. Ṣadrā needs to articulate such an internal coherence because he wants not only to show God's inherent wisdom and infinite mercy, but also to relativize all coercion and corruption in the natural world as contributing towards the optimal welfare and goodness of things. To speak of the world and then to demand absolute perfection is, for Ṣadrā, not to be logical:

> "When you say why fire, which is one of the species belonging to this kind of being, cannot be found in such a way that it leads to no evil, it is as if you were to say why was fire not something other than fire. It is impossible to make fire other than [what it is, i.e.,] fire. Likewise, it is impossible that fire be fire and not burn the cloth of the hermit when it touches fire."[20]

The set of arguments Sadra advances here and under Argument 4 below presupposes a universal *telos* to which all things strive for their perfection. The optimal goodness of things intended by Divine Providence is obtained only when things reach their perfection. As the examples above show, this process is not without limitations and impediments. It involves coercion, destruction, corruption, and regeneration in the natural order of things. What this entails for the best of all possible worlds argument is that things and, by derivation, the present world-order can be seen as being in their best or optimal state only in reference to their 'yet-to-be-actualized' perfection. This is further underlined by the Aristotelian framework of how contingent beings come to be: things are always hung between a state of potentiality and a state of actuality. While pure potentiality belongs to the hyle, pure actuality belongs to immaterial substances and ultimately to God. In this sense, there is always some room for the world to become something else, i.e., something better and more complete. If this conclusion is correct, then the world is not

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[20] Op. cit., 78. Ṣadrā borrows the example of fire from Ibn Sinā; cf. *Najāt*, 322 and 325. See also *Ishārāt*, 3:319.

necessarily the best of all possible worlds at this given moment. It is so only in relation to a higher goodness and perfection to be achieved in the 'future' –a 'future' to be understood in terms of ontological realization, not some kind of temporal evolution.

Argument 4: "What is lesser serves what is higher"

In keeping with the hierarchical view of the cosmos held by traditional philosophers, Ṣadrā identifies lesser beings and causes as serving higher beings and purposes. The implication and Ṣadrā's final conclusion is that evil as a lesser state of being serves a higher good.[21] On the one hand, this hierarchy enables Ṣadrā to see all beings as contributing to a higher purpose, this purpose being the completion of the potential perfection of the species. In this sense, the cosmos functions on an anthropic principle in that everything is now related to everything else from the Big Bang to my writing this article. On the other hand, Ṣadrā uses this 'hierarchic purposiveness' to relativize all beings and causes. As we shall see shortly, this is a crucial step towards defining evil as a relative state that comes about in the absence of goodness. Things that are imperfect and evil in their isolation appear to be so only relatively when placed within the network of hierarchical relations to which they belong.[22] When God created things, says Ṣadrā, He "made what is nobler a cause for the being of what is lower, and a reason for its subsistence, complementing and leading it to its maximum end and ultimate goal."[23]

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21 Hick considers this view to be the foundation of 'optimistic' theodicy that defines evil as relative and necessary within the larger context of cosmic purposiveness. Cf. *Evil and the God of Love* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1978), 145-68.

22 Ṣadrā's elaborate 'metaphysics of relations' has a direct bearing on this point, but it will take us too far a field to go into it here. We can state, albeit briefly, that the nexus of ontological relations determines the context within which particular objects are found: a tree is taller than grass, grass is closer to the ground than the moon, my hands are bigger than my eyes, etc. What these examples show is that particular objects are always found within a context of relations. The same holds true for the way we know the world: as knowing subjects, we do not interact with the world as a *tabula rasa* shorn of any or all relations. We encounter the world as derivative of what Ṣadrā occasionally calls the 'relational being'. In this sense, relationality is an essential function of particular objects in that we cannot perceive particular objects in complete isolation from the sets of relations within which we find them. This view, which I call the metaphysics of relations, breaks down the conventional barrier between "perceiving through particulars" and "thinking through universals." For a defense of this view of relations and particularity, see Brian John Martine, "Relations, Indeterminacy, and Intelligibility" in *New Essays in Metaphysics*, ed. Robert C. Neville (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987), 237-52. See also his *Individuals and Individuality* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984).

23 *Asfār*, III, 2, p. 101.

Ṣadrā goes on to explain this hierarchic purposiveness by applying it to the three kingdoms of plants, animals, and humans:

> "A particular plant is lower in rank than a particular animal, its state baser than that of the animal. This is so because the matter of plants has been made nourishment for the matter of animals and a support for the animal's subsistence. In this way, the vegetative soul has been made a servant for the animal soul, and subservient to it. By the same token, the rank of the animal souls is lower and less perfect than the rank of the human soul because they have been made subservient to the rational soul."[24]

The same rule applies to the subordination of certain animals to others, and explains why the eating of some animals by others is not evil in and of itself, but rather serves a higher purpose, viz., the preservation of the animal species and a host of other 'benefits' to which I shall turn shortly.

No less significant than hierarchic purposiveness is the 'principle of reason', which Heidegger attributes to Leibniz's celebrated phrase *nihil est sine ratione*, i.e., "nothing is without a reason."[25] Within the theistic context of Abrahamic faiths, there is nothing surprising about the idea that there is a reason for things to be the way they are rather than the way they are not. It is, however, important to note that Leibniz's statement is not to be understood solely in terms of causation. What the principle states is also an axiomatic statement. It is obvious that if B is caused by A, then B is not without a reason. The same applies to A, but in a different way. When considering A from the standpoint of the principle of reason, we take a step back and place A within a different causal matrix in which A is now understood as *A-in-relation-to* B.

Our main concern, however, is not the 'whatness' (*mā-huwa*) of things but their 'whyness' (*limā-huwa*). Keeping in mind the theistic context of Ṣadrā's (and Leibniz's) discussion, our question is as much causal as it is axiological. This leads us to revise the principle of reason in an important way: nothing is without a reason *for the way it is*. It is not difficult to see where this revision takes us. In the language of medieval philosophy, "the way it is" is interchangeable with "the way it *ought to be*." As Ṣadrā states, "whatever happens in the world of generation happens for a reason. Therefore

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[24] *Asfār*, III, 2, p. 101-2.

[25] Cf. Martin Heidegger, *The Principle of Reason*, trans. Reginald Lilly (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996).

whatever is not necessitated by a cause does not exist. The chain of reasons leads to one single source by which all things are caused by God's knowledge of them and His wisdom and providence. There is nothing in existence that is not compatible with the nature of its causes and reasons leading up to the One Truth."[26]

Now, I have to leave the further articulation of this point to another discussion. But it is clear that Ṣadrā locates the principle of reason in both senses of "is" and "ought" within God's 'teleological wisdom' (*al-ḥikmat al-ghā'iyyah*). This teleological wisdom desires the ultimate perfection of things. It also sets up a framework of relations in which everything benefits from something else and is benefited by others. Ṣadrā expresses this point as follows: "When God the Wise created the beings of this world either for acquiring a benefit or dispelling harm from animals, He did not leave anything without a benefit and utility. Had He not made the animal corpses food for these bodies [of other animals], these corpses would be null and without any benefit and return. In fact, they would cause great harm and create general corruption."[27]

In addition to hierarchic purposiveness and principle of reason, Ṣadrā uses one more argument to demonstrate the relative imperfection of the natural order. The principle of "best possibility" (*imkān al-ashraf*), which Ṣadrā traces back to Aristotle, Ibn Sinā' and Suhrawardi, states that every lower cause or being points to the existence of something higher.[28] In Suhrawardi's terms, "when there is a baser contingent being, there must also be a higher contingent being."[29] This is to be understood in terms of a reversed causality in that we move from effect to cause, from B to A, and assume that A as cause/reason has a higher ontological status than B as the effect. As a causal term, A is certainly prior to B. But what Ṣadrā wants to assert is that causal precedence allows for ontological priority: not only is A prior to B but, in a stronger sense, it is ontologically higher than B.[30] Once this is warranted, then it

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[26] *Asfār*, III, 2, p. 112.

[27] *Asfār*, III, 2, p. 102.

[28] For Ṣadrā's short history of the principle of best possibility and his praise of it, see Op. cit., 244-45.

[29] Suhrawardi, *Ḥikmat al-ishrāq*, part II, section 12, paragraph 164; in *The Philosophy of Illumination*, trans. John Walbridge and Hossein Ziai (Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1999), 107.

[30] Suhrawardi's commentator Shahrazūri concurs with this conclusion when he says that "substances that are completely disengaged from matter are the dominating intellective lights and they are nobler (*ashraf*) than the disengaged souls that are [yet still] in command of [their] bodies." Cf. Shams al-Din Muḥammad Shahrazūri, *Sharḥ ḥikmat al-ishrāq*, ed. Hossein Ziai (Tehran: Institute for Cultural Studies and Research, 1993), 390.

becomes easier to move from a lower cause to a higher one and, consequently, from a being of lower ontological complexity to a higher one.

For Ṣadrā, the principle of best possibility accomplishes, *inter alia*, two things. First of all, it sets up, once more, a hierarchy of causal relations. This leads to the idea that what emanates from God is not the lowest possibility (*imkān akhass*)[31] in the world, i.e., the hyle and other forms of non-existence and natural evil, but rather "what must be the noblest of beings that have no blemish of nonexistence and imperfection."[32] In other words, what is considered evil and imperfect in itself does not come directly from God. This explains why even the wickedest beings in the world do not blemish God's generosity, power, and wisdom. Secondly, the principle of best possibility establishes the following principle: the actual imperfection and baseness of corporeal (i.e., created) beings are their contrastive component in the descending order of creation. Put differently, creation necessitates the gradual privation of things, and it is this process that gives rise to the basest possibility in the world of generation and corruption, i.e., the source of all evil and imperfections.

The overall result of the principle of best possibility is to establish a hierarchic world-order with intermediary stages of being between God as pure goodness and everything else. As we shall see below in Argument 6, this confirms one more time the relativity of both natural and moral evil, while at the same time constructing a holistic view of the cosmos. After stating these points, Ṣadrā adds that

> "when we witness the relationship of some beings to others, their benefiting from one another, the inclination of every imperfect being towards its perfection, and the desire of every lower being to reach what is higher through a noble inclination and natural desire as God entrusted in His own essence, we see the affection of every sublime being for what is underneath it, the providence of every powerful being for what is lower than itself, and the governance of every soul and intellect for what falls under its ju-

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31 Ṣadrā claims credit for the "principle of lowest possibility," which he cites as complementing Suhrawardi's "principle of best possibility." See *Asfār*, III, 2, p. 257.

32 *Asfār*, III, 2, p. 258. For the same reason, the first being that is created by God or emanates from Him must be something incorporeal, free from the limitations of matter and nonexistence. Hence the significance of the oft-repeated hadith that "the first thing God created was the intellect," "the first thing God created was the pen," and still "the first thing God created was my light." Cf. *Asfār*, III, 2, p. 117 and other places. Even the classical Ash'arite *Kalam* appears to agree with this explanation. Cf. Sa'd al-Din al-Taftazāni, *Sharḥ al-maqāṣid*, ed. A. 'Umayra (Beirut: Ālam al-Kutub, 1989), 3:355-56.

> risdiction ... We see this to be the soundest governing, the most intense description, the best fashion, the subtlest perfection, and completion in such a way that it leads them to their penultimate perfection and completion."[33]

Argument 5: "The world cannot take pure goodness without ceasing to exist"

In the ascending order of created beings, the closer a being is to pure goodness, the more 'beingful' it becomes, and this enables it to have a greater share in goodness. A plant has more being and thus more goodness than inanimate objects, because it contains more life and complexity and benefits other beings in the cosmos.[34] In this onto-cosmogonic scheme, Ṣadrā sees an axiological hierarchy of natural objects with different degrees of goodness and evil. In his commentary on Ibn Sina's *Shifā'*, Ṣadrā says that "good by itself is that which effects every one and by which others become delighted and to which others are attracted. In reality, this is being (*al-wujūd*). The variation of things in goodness is proportionate to their variation in being. The stronger a thing's being, the greater its goodness."[35] Since ultimate goodness belongs to God only, all contingent beings contain a degree of goodness in proportion to their proximity to God, but cannot claim to be on a par with the source of goodness. The world has to be less than God to be what it is.

This idea, shared by the majority of medieval philosophers and already familiar to us from the *kalam* thinkers and others, is particularly salutary for Ṣadrā's overall purpose of showing the optimal nature of what is actual. Since the world is by definition other and less than God, it cannot take pure light and goodness without ceasing to be itself. In responding to the question why God did not create a world with no imperfections or evil in it, Ṣadrā says that "if all of the lower beings were full of light, the matter of the cosmos would be destroyed by the burning of the light of higher [beings]."[36] By the same token, "the beings that are caused [by another cause] cannot be pure goodness in every respect. Such a being has a mixture of evil in proportion to its

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[33] *Asfār*, III, 2, p. 117.

[34] For Ṣadrā's discussion of these examples in relation to the creation of human beings, see *Asfār*, III, 2, p. 132.

[35] *Sharḥ wa ta'liqa-yi ṣadr al-muta'allihin bar ilāhiyyāt-i shifā'*, ed. N. Ḥabibi (Tehran: Intishārāt-i Bunyād-i Ḥikmat-i Islāmi-yi Ṣadrā, 1382 A.H.), 75.

[36] *Asfār*, III, 2, p. 122.

degree of [the highest] degree of absolute goodness for which there is no limit in its goodness and beyond which there is no other goal."[37]

What we have here is thus a doctrine of ontological necessity: in order for the world to be what it is, it must be something less than God and thus imperfect. The evil that we find in it is an effect of this state of affairs, and must be accepted as such. In short, Ṣadrā's argument comes down to a "you can't have it all" argument in that we cannot speak of the world and expect it to be identical with God in goodness and perfection.[38] Understood in this sense, the question is not one of God's ability or inability to do certain things, such as putting the heavens through the eye of a needle. It is rather us attributing logically impossible affairs to God and then expecting Him to do them.

As we would expect, this line of thinking leads Ṣadrā to develop another closely related argument which states that the present world-order is based on exact proportions to produce the best results for the cosmos, as well as for other beings living in it. Changing anything in this order would lead to a different mode of being and not necessarily to a better one. Ṣadrā provides a long list of examples from the sun and the moon to the four elements and the human body to underscore the miraculous perfection and proportionality of the natural order.[39] He even quotes Jāḥiẓ who says that "when you look at this world in which we are, you find it like a house in which everything you need is made readily available. You find the heavens elevated like a ceiling, the earth spread like a carpet, stars arranged like lamps. As for man, it is as if he has a house over which he has dominion, all sorts of plants for his benefits, and classes of animals at his disposal."[40] To this Ṣadrā adds that "when you meditate upon the world of the heavens, its majesty and the number of its stars, you find a prosperous house from among the "houses which God has permitted to be raised up and in which His name is remembered" (Qur'an, 24/36)."[41]

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37 *Asfār*, III, 2, p. 58.

38 Plantinga's "free will defense" is based on such an argument. Plantinga defines his position as follows: "A world containing creatures who freely perform both good and evil actions –and do more good than evil– is more valuable than a world containing quasi-automata who always do what is right because they are unable to do otherwise." Alvin Plantinga, "The Free Will Defence" in *Philosophy in America*, ed. Max Black, reprinted in *Readings in the Philosophy of Religion: An Analytical Approach*, ed. Baruch A. Broody (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1974), 187. See also his "God, Evil, and the Metaphysics of Freedom" in *The Problem of Evil*, ed. Marilyn M. Adams and Robert M. Adams (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 83-109.

39 For Ṣadrā's elaborate examples from the creation of the elements to the creation of man, see *Asfār*, III, 2, pp. 123-44.

40 *Asfār*, III, 2, p. 143.

41 *Asfār*, III, 2, p. 143.

In short, the world must be the way it is in order for it to continue to be the world as we know it. Anything less or more than its present order would corrupt it and make the overarching Divine plan an imperfect one. This is also why the world thrives on the perpetual interaction and complementariness of opposites. Without this, no change would take place in the world and as a result there would be no life on earth. "The interaction of opposite qualities that takes place in this world," affirms Ṣadrā, "is the reason for the continuation of the effusion [of life]. This is goodness in relation to the universal world-order and evil in relation to particular individuals."[42] He goes on to say that "without contradiction, there would be no generation and corruption, and without generation and corruption, there would be no infinite number of individuals ... the interaction between the opposites is a necessity so that there would be balance."[43] According to Ṣadrā, the creation of human beings in successive generations rests on the same principle: Had God created all of the children of Adam from the beginning of man's earthly life to its end, there would be no place for them in the world, and this would be contrary to God's wisdom and generosity.[44]

Argument 6: "All evil is relative"

Ṣadrā's closing argument that all evil is relative is one that we have anticipated all along, and it is predicated upon the ontological priority of goodness over evil. Following the Peripatetic tradition, Ṣadrā reaffirms the view that evil is the privation of goodness and arises when goodness is absent for either natural or moral reasons. Sickness, for instance, is the absence of health, blindness the absence of sight, falsehood the absence of truth, injustice the absence of justice, and so on.[45] In articulating this view, Ṣadrā establishes goodness as a cosmic principle and says that "goodness is that which everything desires, to which everything is inclined, and with which their goal of attaining whatever perfection is possible within their reach is achieved."[46] Since pure evil must go back to absolute non-being and absolute non-being cannot exist, all evil is relative due to the ontological privation of things vis-à-vis God's absolute being.[47] In Ibn Sinā's words, "evil by itself is

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42 *Asfār*, III, 2, p. 71.

43 *Asfār*, III, 2, p. 77.

44 *Asfār*, III, 2, p. 95.

45 Cf. Ibn Sinā's remarks and Ṭūsi's commentary in *Ishārāt*, 3:320.

46 *Asfār*, III, 2, p. 58.

47 Ṣadrā mentions five categories of things: that which is pure goodness, that which has more goodness than evil, that which has more evil than goodness, that which has equal amo-

non-existence, but not completely non-existent."[48] Therefore, Ṣadrā says that when we look at "all the things in this world which the majority of people call evil, we do not find them as evil in themselves, but only accidentally."[49]

Like Ibn Sinā[50], Ṣadrā extends the definition of evil as privation of goodness to natural as well as moral evil, i.e., the kind of evil perpetrated by human beings. Such moral evil as robbery, injustice, wrongful killing, and fornication are evil only in relation to the moral requirement that they should be avoided. In Ṣadrā's words, they are evil when committed against "reason and religion"[51]. There are two main reasons why these acts in and of themselves are not evil. First of all, they serve other purposes for the material welfare of human beings. In the case of fornication, which is forbidden by both reason and religion, for instance, what is evil is not the source of fornication, i.e., the desire itself, because "desire is a praiseworthy quality in itself insofar as its reality, which is love, is concerned" and also because of its role "in determining masculine and feminine forms and its being the reason for the preservation of the [human] species and procreation." Fornication becomes evil when desire stops listening to reason. The second and probably more important reason is that "all acts of obedience and disobedience ... are matters of being (*umūr wujūdiyyah*), and being cannot be devoid of (some) goodness in one way or another."[52]

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unt of goodness and evil, and finally that which is pure evil. Ṣadrā rejects the last three categories of things by saying that "in reality they do not exist in the world." He thus reduces everything to the first two categories. *Asfār*, III, 2, p. 68. This is a freelance adaptation of Ṭūsi's commentary on Ibn Sinā's defense of evil as the privation of goodness. Cf. *Ishārāt*, 3:321.

48 *Najāt*, 321. Locating evil within the domain of non-being is a typically Neoplatonic theme. Consider the following: "... evil cannot be included in what really exists or what is beyond existence; for these are good. So it remains that if evil exists, it must be among non-existent things, as a sort of form of non-existence, and pertain to one of the things that are mingled with non-being or somehow share in non-being." Plotinus, *Enneads*, I, 8, 3, trans. A. H. Armstrong (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1966), 283. But Ibn Sinā and Ṣadrā are careful not to push this argument too far, since if evil were pure non-being, our statements about it would have no truth-value. In other words, our claims about non-being as an absolute concept are not necessarily what we would call 'proper statements', and in this sense they may have no truth-value. For a defense of this view in Plato, see Jason Xenakis, "Plato on Statement and Truth-Value," *Mind*, 66 (1957), 165-72. See also Nicholas Rescher, "The Ontology of the Possible" in *The Possible and the Actual: Readings in the Metaphysics of Modality*, ed. Michael J. Loux (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979), 166-67; reprinted from Rescher's *Logic and Onthology* (New York: New York University Press, 1973).

49 *Asfār*, III, 2, p. 62.

50 Cf. *Najāt*, 324.

51 *Asfār*, III, 2, p. 105.

52 *Asfār*, III, 2, p. 104.

Ṣadrā summarizes this rather curious and extremely optimistic view of moral evil as follows:

> "The condemned moral characters that prevent human souls from reaching their intellective perfection like avarice, cowardice, wastefulness, pride, and vanity, and such wicked acts as injustice, wrongful killing, adultery, theft, calumny, defamation, obscenity, and the like are not evil in themselves, but rather states of goodness emanating from being (*al-khayrāt al-wujūdiyyah*). They are [states of] perfections for natural entities and animal or vegetative powers that we find in man. Their evilness is only in comparison to a higher and nobler power which, in its perfection, has command over the disobedient and noncompliant powers under it."[53]

Conclusion: Is this the best of all possible worlds?

Two major conclusions are warranted by the foregoing arguments. The first is the privative view of evil that considers evil an accidental and temporal absence of goodness. The second sees evil as a contrastive and necessary component of a larger good built into the present world-order. Defined as such, what appears to be evil in relation to a particular immoral or harmful effect is no longer seen as evil in itself. In both cases, evil is relativized. These two views, supported by the majority of the theistic defenders of theodicy, also lend support to Ṣadrā's overall claim that this is the best world-order that God created for the wellbeing of His creation.

Defined along these lines, theodicy advocates optimism by relativizing evil and eventually subsuming it under Divine Providence. This religious optimism does not deny the existence of evil in the world. Rather, it attempts to take the world as it is, and constructs a system of morality by which we can make sense of evil as a given of the present world in which we pursue peace, justice, and happiness. For the Abrahamic religions, there is essentially nothing wrong with accepting the reality of evil, as this is precisely where religion claims to be a guide for leading an ethical and virtuous life in which there is no place for the sorts of 'unnecessary evil' that emanate from the actions of free yet morally responsible human beings. Ṣadrā bases his concept of the moral history of mankind on this notion: "The reason why the human souls are found in this world [in which there is evil and suffering] is the testing of the children of Adam with these worldly misfortunes that have surrounded them because of sin and disobedience. This was in fact the

[53] *Asfār*, III, 2, p. 61.

single mistake their father Adam and mother Eve committed "when they tasted of the [forbidden] tree" and "became conscious of their nakedness" (Qur'an, 7/22)."[54]

This reference to the original 'mistake' (not sin) of the human species is meant to emphasize the necessity of moral evil in a world inhabited by agents that have free will. The realization of the ultimate *telos* of human beings depends on this freedom. Just as the natural world-order attains its mode of perfection through a series of acts that involve disruption and coercion, the completion of the human state involves encountering moral evil and overcoming it. In this sense, the human state is the best of all possible states only in reference to a 'yet-to-be-actualized' potentiality that is inherent in human intelligence and freedom. What this means for the best of all possible worlds argument is that the optimal goodness of the present world depends on the affirmative response of these intelligent and free agents to participate in the cosmological march of existence towards its universal *telos*.

Whether the forgoing arguments in defense of theodicy are persuasive or not depends largely on the extent to which one countenances this religious optimism. Assuming that we do sanction this optimism and take refuge in the larger picture of which Ṣadrā keeps reminding us, evil becomes an issue to be dealt with in moral terms rather than an argument against God's wisdom and justice. Yet, even when we accept the consequences of this view, there remains an element of 'mystery' to which Ṣadrā turns at the end of his belabored exposition when he invokes the limits of human knowledge vis-à-vis God's infinite wisdom and providence. After providing a long list of examples and arguments for the optimal perfection of the present world-order, which we have analyzed above, Ṣadrā rounds off his discussion by pleading ignorance, implying, we may presume, that the question of evil remains ultimately a mystery to the human mind. In spite of the numerous arguments he advances, Ṣadrā is still, it appears, not fully convinced that one can explain *away* the challenge of theodicy. This is how he ends his discussion, with which, I think, it would be appropriate to end our discussion as well:

> "This [i.e., what we have said so far] is only an example of the subtleties of God's providence and generosity for His creatures that are manifest. No one can covet the knowledge of the subtleties and mysteries of [God's] ge-

[54] Ṣadrā, *Tafsir al-qur'ān al-karim*, ed. Muhammad Khwajawi (Qom: Intisharati Bidar, 1366 A.H.), 5:270.

nerosity and mercy in His invisible world and exalted angelic domain. Nor can one enumerate the beauties of creation and wisdom in beings, which make us supple in long lives, since the knowledge of scholars is trivial and inconsiderable in comparison to what the prophets and saints, peace be upon them, know. What they know is still very little in comparison to the knowledge of the angels who are in God's proximity and those human beings who are close to God through their standing presence (*qiyām*) before Him. Now, even if we add all the knowledge of the angels, the jinn, and the humans to God's knowledge, this would not qualify to be called "knowledge." It should be called puzzlement, wonder, incapacity, and imperfection rather than knowledge and wisdom. The real wisdom is the knowledge of things as they are. As was mentioned before, the knowledge of a thing in its essence is a mode of its existence, and nothing encompasses things except their source and giver of existence. Thus there is no real knower (*hakim*) except God alone. The attribution of wisdom and knowledge to others is only a metaphor and parable. That is why it has been addressed to all beings through His words that "of knowledge you have been given but little" (Qur'an, 17/85)."[55]

[55] *Tafsir*, 5:147-48. The Qur'anic verse Ṣadrā quotes reads "They ask you about the spirit. Say: the spirit is of my Lord's command, and of knowledge you have been given but little." The specific referent of this verse is the nature of spirit. But, as we see in numerous other cases, Ṣadrā takes this to be a general rule for all kinds of knowledge that pertain to the invisible world (*al-ghayb*).