

Principality of Existence and the Problem of Evil

Hamidreza Ayatollahy
Associate Professor of Philosophy Department
Allameh Tabatabaai University

The problem of evil is one of the most important problems in philosophy and theology since ancient time. The belief in God and the reality of evil make some paradoxes that must be solved for every one who believes in God. The problem goes back to Epicurus (341-270BC). He briefly stated the problem in his famous words¹:

Is he willing to prevent evil, but not able? then he is impotent. Is he able, but not willing? then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing? Whence then is evil?

In the new ages the problem changed its face and instead denying some of attributes of God it begin to be a disproof for the existence of God. The most famous one is J.L. Mackie's². Because of special view of Christianity from "love of God" the problem has been a serious one in Western philosophy and theology so that there can be found no philosopher of religion or theologian that has not any view about this matter. Among Muslim thinker this problem has another aspect; the problem has not been aimed to the love of God but to divine theodicy which differs from Western path of adventures. In this paper I am going to examine the problem and solution in Western thought then introduce the reply in the light of famous philosophical foundation of Mulla Sadra's philosophy, namely the "principality of existence" or "fundamental reality of existence".

In Western thought the problem was so important that some philosophies appeared in accordance with the solution. For example "process philosophy" of Whitehead and his followers bring into some philosophical views that annihilate the problem fundamentally. In process philosophy and theology the power of God is not a coercive one but it is a kind of persuasion³. This view rejects the omnipotence of God; therefore the reality of evil will not be the guilt of divine action.

More recently the problem was posed by David Hume (1711–1776), who argues through his persona Philo in *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* that not merely the fact of evil, but the enormous amount of evil make the existence of a deity dubious. In his opinion, it is arguable that there is actually more evil than good in the world, so it is hard to see how one can harmonize the crucial propositions⁴.

Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646–1716) tried to set forth a thorough-going theodicy. In his book, *The Theodicy*, he argues that the fact of evil in no way refutes theism. His answer to the kind of objection made by Hume is to contend that God permits evil to exist in order to bring about greater good and that Adam's fall was a "happy

sin” because it led to the incarnation of the Son of God, and raised humanity to a higher destiny than would otherwise have been the case⁵.

In contemporary restatement of the problem especially as a disproof of the existence of God, the argument goes as the following premises⁶:

- 1- God is omnipotence, omniscience.
- 2- God is perfectly good.
- 3- Evil exists.

and result:

- 1- If God (an all-powerful, omniscient, omnibenevolent being) exists, there would be no (or no unnecessary) evil in the world.
- 2- There is evil (or unnecessary evil) in the world.
- 3- Therefore, God does not exist.

The main defense of theism in the light of evil is the free will defense, going back as far as St. Augustine⁷ (354-430) and receiving modern treatment in the work of John Hick⁸, Alvin Plantinga⁹, and Richard Swinburne¹⁰. The free will defense adds¹¹ a fourth premise to Epicurus’s paradox in order to show that premises 1-3 are consistent and not contradictory:

- 4- It is logically impossible for God to create free creatures and guarantee that they will never do evil.

Since it is a good thing to create free creatures that are morally responsible agents, there is no assurance that they will not also do evil.

Proponents of the free will defense claim that all moral evil derives from creature’s freedom of will. But how does the theist account for natural evil? Western thought has distinguished between two types of evil: moral and natural. “moral evil” covers all those bad things for which humans are morally responsible. “Natural evil” includes those terrible events that occur in nature of their own accord, such as hurricanes, tornadoes, earthquakes, volcano eruption, natural diseases, and so on, that cause suffering to humans and animals.

However, there are two different ways for solution of the problem of natural evil: The first one, suggested by Alvin Plantinga, is to attribute natural evil, such as disease and tornadoes, to the work of the devil and his angels. The second way, favored by Swinburne, argues¹² that natural evil is part and parcel of the nature of things, resulting from the combination of deterministic physical laws that are necessary for consistent action and the responsibility given to human to exercise their freedom.

The Principality of Existence and the Problem

However, the principality of existence will change our perspective about the reality of the world that will change the problem of evil basically. Mulla Sadra, as the founder of philosophical principle of "the principality of existence" or "fundamental reality of Existence", has argued for the divine theodicy and omnibenevolent in two

parts of his famous book *Asfar*. In the seventh volume¹³ his treatments goes as those that is posed by Western thinkers.

In his first reply his argument may set as follow:

- 1- God is only the efficient Cause of every finite substance (and nothing else).
- 2- Evil is not a substance and must be ascribed to nothingness.
- 3- Therefore, God is not the efficient cause of evil.

His other replies can trace the following path:

- 1- Evil has no essence or being of its own; it is an accident for good beings; it is a privation of the essence or being of another. Evil has no form of its own and has no formal cause. Furthermore, evil has a relative characteristic.
- 2- God is not the direct efficient cause of evil. Metaphysical imperfection can occur only as a by-product of God's efficient causal activity.
- 3- Moral evil, which can and does affect the functioning of man's nature, is rooted in human freedom. God willed the freedom (which is good) but creatures will the evil.
- 4- The amount of evil in this kind of world is much less than the amount of good.
- 5- The nature of man can not be totally corrupted or else man would no longer be human.
- 6- Man's metaphysical nature is not diminished to the point that man is no longer rationally and morally responsible for his action.
- 7- The grace of God enables man to overcome whatever propensities to evil he has so that he is able not to sin.
- 8- The fact of finitude makes evil possible but not necessary. Corruption is possible because man is a corruptible creature. Only God is incorruptible¹⁴.

I think this kind of reply is in the way of principality of quiddity that differs from Mulla Sadra's philosophical attitude. However, he has another view about the nature of evil in the second volume of *Asfar*¹⁵. This reply is the direct conclusion of principality of existence. Before studying his view, let's explain the principality or fundamental reality of existence, which is the turning point in Islamic philosophy.

According to Sadra the "notion of existence" is one of the best known concepts. It is self-evident and is reasonable by itself, because it is self-apparent and makes others apparent. There is no need for any other thing to make its notion clearer¹⁶.

But the deepest reality of existence has in the extremity of hiddenness¹⁷. Because its deepest reality is external, if its reality were to come to our mind as one thing among others this would loose its reality, because the reality in so far as it is reality -in contrast to its notion- must be external and remain outside the mind. Furthermore, if its reality such as fire were the actualized in the mind in contrast to

its effects would also be actualized - and in our example our mind would be burnt by the fire!-

Mulla Sadra says¹⁸:

"The truth of existence is the clearest thing in appearance and presence; and its essence is the most hidden thing in grasping and understanding the depth of its reality"

Existence and Quiddity

When we study some evidence of reality like the existence of "I", of "the earth", of a "tree", or of "whiteness" and so on, we realize that we have many conceptions of things like "tree", "earth", "I", "whiteness" and so on, and each of them differs from the others. But, in spite of their differences they have one similarity, namely that "all of them exist and have reality outside mind." So, we know that we have two notions of things, one of them is notions like tree, whiteness, earth, etc., and the other is the notion of existence or reality that is connected to all of those notions. We name the first one thing-ness, or "quiddity", and the second one "existence".

If we observe carefully we will realize that our mental concept of existence is contrary to the concept of things like tree, the earth, whiteness, etc. to which we ascribe existence. Our reason abstracts quiddity - which is said in answer to the "what of definition" - from existence, conceives it, and then ascribes existence to it in the mind. This means that existence is additional and like an accident to quiddity in the mind, and the concept of that existence is not the same as that of a quiddity or any part of it. This difference can be realized just by surveying our mind and its conception of existence and quiddity. There is no need to demonstrate it, but There is some demonstration for it that can be observed in detailed books¹⁹.

The "notion" of existence also has a univocal meaning. When we say "man exists", "Brussels exists", "tree exists" and so on, the concept of "existence" in these sentences is the same. Although concepts of "human" and "Brussels" and "tree" are different, existence is predicated to each of them in the same meaning²⁰.

Fundamental Reality (principality) of Existence

In some cases, when we ascribe something to another, there are external referent for each predicate and subject in the external world just as they have reality in the mind. For example, when we affirm that "this paper is white" or "this surface is square" or "that water is warm", just as each word -paper, white, surface, square, water and warm- has special concept in the mind, so, in reality each one has special and different reality. Although each reality is connected to another, like the reality of whiteness which is connected to the reality of paper, but at the same time, each one has its own reality and special applicability.

In some other cases, when we predicate one predicate to a subject the matter is not like this. In these cases each predicate has not special and different reality, there is no duality in reality between predicate and subject, and unity of them only

can be found externally; so, that multiplicity arises only from mind. In other words, mind divides one concrete unity into some numerous matters by its analytical power; and produces different concepts and numerous meanings from one external reality that has no multiplicity outside the mind.

One of those concrete units is quiddity and existence. When we say "tree exists", the subject and the predicate (the concept of tree and the concept of existence) certainly have multiplicity in mind, and there is contrariety between them. As it was explained above, existence is additional to quiddity in mind. But, it is undoubted that the case is not so in external contain in real world so that one's appearance is made by another, or one belongs to another. This is the mind, which makes two different concepts from those external units. In the real world, quiddity and existence like tree and existence of tree, or man and existence of man are not two species of realities. How can one reality have two separate realities consist of itself and its existence or reality? Everything is identified with its existence externally and totally -this totality is in mind- constructs a unity. This duality is the result of analytic power of the mind. In other word, both quiddity and existence are not fundamentally real.

On the other hand, both quiddity and existence can not be unreal and be only mentally posited, just as both of them can not be real. Because this leads to mere sophism that suppose nothing is outside of us, and there is no concrete things. Therefore either quiddity or existence can be fundamentally real. Because both of them can be neither fundamentally real nor unreal and mentally posited.

Some philosophers have the opinion that what is fundamentally real is quiddity, and there are quiddities of things in concrete world; and mind by observing real things abstracts concept of existence from them. So, existence is only a mental concept and it has no reality. This opinion at first appears to be true, and because of strong laboring of mind, we think that in reality there are things and we have the notion of existence by abstraction.

But Mulla Sadra changed the way of philosophy by the opinion that in external world there is only existence (its reality not its notion); and our mind by observing the limitations of existence or reality makes some concepts of things that are different from each other. So, the fundamentally real is existence and quiddity is mentally posited. This view is also called "principality of Existence"²¹.

Now, we turn our attention to the problem of evil and we are going to see how fundamental reality of existence encounters this problem.

If we survey the evil in the world we realize that the problem of evil arises in the case of deficiencies and differences. Some people are more intelligent than others, some people have good eyesight, while others are blind, and so on. Is it not possible for God to give everything the same favor? He has created human kind that suffers in his life with a lot of limitations. He who is omnipotence can give every person the things that he needs without deficiencies that make a lot of suffering. If somebody

wishes he had a better condition that prevent evils encounter him, just those things that God have given it to happy people, then may he complain God why He discriminate against him?

If we consider as who believe in principality of quiddity, perhaps the question will be legitimate; because God can give every person some more perfection, it is in His hand. If God create a person with some limitation the person may want God to give him more favors. But according to principality of existence, it is existence that is fundamental real and the thing-ness of an existent being or its quiddity is mentally posited. Therefore, in reality this is not the thing-ness or quiddity of something that needs to come into existence but only its existence. Thus God creates existence only; then after the appearance of this part of existence it is the quiddity that mind abstracts it from the limitation of existent being. There is no thing-ness or quiddity in the world that God gives them existence. The differences of things are due to the type of limitations of existence that comes from the multiplicity of our world. Because the man is something which necessarily is in the material world and the material world must necessarily be multiple, therefore there must be different existences which our mind abstract from them different things. If material situation of man is necessary for him and without being material there will be no man at all, then the differences between of them is due to the essence of humanity.

Perhaps, following explanation makes our purpose clearer:

All of us have heard the wish of some people that they wish they were another man with a better condition or they wish their father and mother were other persons instead of their real father and mother. Let's examine to see whether it is possible or not. For example, Tom wishes his father (A) and mother (B) who are not rich and intelligent were other persons like Dick's father (A') and mother (B') who are both rich and intelligent. Tom thinks that if A' and B' were his father and mother he would have a better life. If he concentrates on the meaning of this proposition he will understand that this sentence is meaningless, because if his father and mother were other persons he would not be Tom. Tom is an existent man whose father and mother are A and B. If A' and B' are father and mother of a person he will not be Tom who wishes so, but this person is Dick who exists with this character. Tom wants to preserve his characteristics that necessitate having A and B as his father and mother, and at the same time he does not have A and B as his parents. This is absurd. All of these are the necessary conditions for the existence of Tom.

Now is it not contradictory for God to create a man –who must necessarily differs from others because of the multiplicity of material world- that not be a man –namely have no differences with others-? We are not people who are each given some different perfection. God has favored existence that in the material world must be multiple and has various limitations; then the meaning of a person arises after that, i.e. then the meaning of “we” appears by the abstraction of our mind. We-ness is not first then it is given existence but there are existences which we-ness is realized from them.

Mulla Sadra argues that the aspect of goodness and unity of things is due to existence and the aspect of evil and difference of the things is quiddities²². Therefore, every goodness is attributed to God and every evil is from having quiddity, which is not real and which is a result of being at a low level (in terms of the levels of perfection of existence).

Notes

- ¹ - See Pojman, Louis. *Philosophy of Religion: An Anthology*. p.151.
- ² - Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism: Arguments for and against the Existence of God*.
- ³ - Griffin, David Ray, *God and Religion in the Postmodern World, Essays in Postmodern Theology*, p.65
- ⁴ - Hume, David. *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*.
- ⁵ - Leibniz, G.W. *Theodicy* trans. E.M. Huggard, Amsterdam.
- ⁶ - Pojman, Louis. *Philosophy of Religion: An Anthology*, p.151 and also Geisler, Norman, *Philosophy of Religion*. p.327.
- ⁷ - Augustine, *The City of God*, XI,9.
- ⁸ - Hick, John, *Evil and the God of Love*, Pp. 253-261.
- ⁹ - Plantinga, Alvin, *God, Freedom and Evil*.
- ¹⁰ - Swinburn, Richard, "The Problem of Evil", in *Reason and Religion*, ed. Stuart C. Brown. p.90.
- ¹¹ - Pojman, p. 153.
- ¹² - Swinburn, Richard, *Providence and the Problem of Evil*.
- ¹³ - Sadra-ad-din Muhammad Shirazi (Mulla Sadra), *al-Hikmat al-muta'aliyah fi'l-asfar al aqliyyah al-arba'ah* Briefly *Al-asfar*(*The Transcendent Wisdom Concerning the Four Intellectual Journeys of the Soul*), vol.7, Pp. 55-94.
- ¹⁴ - Geisler, pp. 344-345.
- ¹⁵ - Sadra-ad-din Muhammad Shirazi (Mulla Sadra), *Al-asfar*, vol.2, pp. 352-356.
- ¹⁶ - See Mulla Sadra *Al-Asfar* pp. 23-27 , 68-69; and *Al-Shavahid al-Robubiyyat* pp. 7,8; and *Al-Masha'ir* pp.13-19; See also Sabzavari Mulla hadi *Sharh al-Manzummat fi al-Hikmat* in its translation by Mohaghegh Mehdi and Izutsu Toshihiko, *The Metaphysics of Sabzavari* p.31.
- ¹⁷ - Mulla Sadra *Al-Masha'ir*, p.12.
- ¹⁸ - Mulla Sadra *Al-Shavahid al Robubiyyat*, p.7-8.
- ¹⁹ - M.H. Tabataba'ii *Bedayat al-Hikmat*, p.13.

²⁰ - Ayatollahy, Hamidreza, *The Existence of God: Mulla Sadra's Seddiqin Argument versus Criticisms of Kant and Hume*, pp. 54-57.

²¹ - More about this subject can be found in: Mulla Sadra *Al-Asfar* p. 38, he has a long chapter with a detailed explanation and demonstrations in *Al-Masha'ir* pp. 28-68, and has seven arguments for fundamental reality of existence in this book. See also Tabataba'ii *Bedayat al-Hikmat* p. 14-16 and *Nihayat al-Hikmat*, p. 21-48 and *Osooli Falsafeh wa Ravishi Realism* and its footnotes, p. 29-39.

²² - Mulla Sadra, *Al-asfar*, vol.2, p.353.

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