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The Quranic Moral Approach to the Problem of Evil

Ahmad Karimi*

* Associate Professor, Department of Islamic Theology, and Faculty Member at the University of Quran and Hadith, Iran. Tehran.

Email: Ahmad.karimi@gmail.com

 orcid.org/0000-0002-5525-2024

Abstract

The problem of evil always confronts humanity with the question of why the world is marked by such vast hardship and adversity, and what proportion of human trials relate to happiness and pleasure. The present study, using a descriptive-analytical method, attempts to present the Quranic approach to the problem of evil by considering the nature of humanity and the world, the ultimate purposes of creation, and human eternal happiness, and by analyzing these components from the perspective of the Holy Quran. Accordingly, the nature of worldly life—which causes negligence, arrogance, and deception—along with the nature of humanity as a free and excessive-desiring being, leads people into epistemological errors and practical afflictions that result in the production of moral evil and eternal misery. In contrast, from the Quran's perspective, the problem of evil serves to nurture the soul and complete the human self, offering people an opportunity to return to their origin, acquire moral virtues, and move toward perfection and ultimate happiness. The Quran, by distinguishing between the ontological and epistemological factors of evil, attributes its causes to human beings, but justifies its wisdom on the basis of the most fundamental condition of the individual human being—eternal happiness—and a moral model.

Keywords: Evil in the Quran, Anthropology of the Quran, Ultimate Happiness, Human Defense, Divine Tests.

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1. Introduction

The problem of evil has always concerned humanity, raising profound ontological questions such as why evil exists. Monotheists have taken different paths in addressing evil, ranging from philosophers who deem it non-existent to those who view it as a major challenge to monotheism, each offering varied interpretations and justifications (Davis, 2010; Peterson et al., 1997; Taliaferro, 2003).

Suffering is a tangible and inseparable part of human life, and the belief in God is directly confronted with the theoretical and practical challenges posed by evil. Finding an answer to the problem of evil from the perspective of the Holy Qur'an, the divine scripture revealed for the guidance and salvation of humankind, can be highly appealing and worthy of study.

A review of the Holy Quran verses, however, reveals an important moral approach underlying the problem of evil. Understanding this approach means recognizing key components in the Quranic paradigm, in which the problem of evil is deeply tied to the nature of humanity, the nature of the world, and the ultimate goal of human happiness.

A close examination of the Qur'anic verses reveals that an important ethical orientation underlies the problem of evil, an orientation whose comprehension requires identifying several key components within the Qur'anic paradigm. Within this framework, the problem of evil is intimately tied to the nature of the human being, the nature of the world, and the ultimate purpose of creation, namely the attainment of human felicity.

2. Theoretical Framework

The historical discourse on moral evil and divine justice (theodicy) — the philosophical justification of God's justice despite the existence of suffering (Adams, 2014; Marina, 2024) — traces its roots to the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. Narratives such as the Book of Job probe profound suffering, challenge simplistic notions of retributive justice, and highlight the enigmatic dimension of divine action (Marina, 2024). Early theological frameworks subsequently emerged to address this ethical and philosophical challenge. Augustine's free-will defense maintains that moral evil arises from humanity's misuse of free agency

and conceptualizes evil as a privation of good (Hick, n.d.; Marina, 2024). Conversely, the tradition of Irenaeus, later refined by John Hick, developed the soul-making theodicy, which proposes that suffering functions as an essential catalyst for spiritual growth and the cultivation of human virtues (Hick, n.d.; Marina, 2024). Leibniz advanced this philosophical trajectory by grounding divine justice in the perfection of "The best of all possible worlds," thereby emphasizing the eschatological fulfillment awaiting rational creatures (Adams, 2014; Rutherford, 2023). Contemporary scholarship continues to scrutinize the logical and evidential problems of evil, seeking a responsible and coherent response to this enduring challenge for Christian theology (Peterson, 1978).

Given the profound existential significance of the problem of evil for human life, and considering the central role of the Qur'an in confronting fundamental human questions, the necessity of this inquiry becomes evident. Despite this, no direct and comprehensive study has addressed the issue from a distinctly Qur'anic perspective. Karimi and Mazani (2016), in *Theological Research Quarterly*, examined Shi'i devotional approaches to the problem of evil. Serajzadeh (2021) analyzed manifestations of moral good and evil in Qur'anic discourse in the *Qur'an and Hadith Research Journal*. The absence of broader systematic research highlights the need for a more thorough investigation.

This article argues that, from the Qur'anic standpoint, a proper understanding of human nature and the nature of the world provides the foundation for interpreting, explaining, and situating the problem of evil. Moreover, uncovering the higher purposes of creation and attending to the realities of the afterlife shed light on the divine wisdom underlying the existence of evil. Adopting a descriptive-analytical method, the present study examines the nature and function of key factors associated with evil in the Qur'an, focusing on Qur'anic anthropology, Qur'anic cosmology, and the Qur'anic conception of human felicity. Through this approach, the study aims to articulate the Qur'an's ethical-pedagogical perspective on the issue.

3. Review of Literature

Given the profound existential significance of the problem of evil for human life, and considering the central role of the Qur'an in confronting fundamental human questions, the necessity of this inquiry becomes evident. Despite this, a direct and comprehensive study of the problem of evil from a distinctly Qur'anic *moral* approach remains underdeveloped.

While the problem of evil is a classic of Western philosophy and theology, Islamic scholarship has addressed it primarily within the context of anthropology, cosmology, and theodicy (specifically, the concept of Divine Justice, *'Adl*). The Mu'tazilite school, for instance, heavily emphasized Divine Justice, arguing that God only wills what is good and beneficial for creation, and that evil is either non-existent, necessary for a greater good, or a result of human freedom. The Ash'ari school, conversely, emphasized Divine Omnipotence, asserting that God is the creator of all actions, including human choice, and is not bound by human concepts of good or evil, though their concept of *Kasb* (acquisition) attempted to reconcile this with human responsibility.

The existing body of literature provides several entry points for the current study:

- Philosophical and Theological Treatments: Much of the existing Islamic discourse mirrors the foundational debates in Western theodicy, applying the concepts of free will and greater good (often linked to the soul-making or perfection argument). Key figures in Islamic philosophy, such as Ibn Sīnā (Avicenna) and Mullā Ṣadrā, addressed evil ontologically, often echoing the Augustinian tradition that evil is a privation (*'adam*) or non-being, arising from the inherent limitations of matter and finitude (*al-sharr al-adabi*). Mullā Ṣadrā, for example, grounds the existence of evil in the necessary movement of creation toward its final end, arguing that contrariety (*Tadādd*) is essential for the continuous effusion of divine grace (*Fayd*) and the actualization of potential being (Mullā Ṣadrā, 1981). Without this dynamism, material existence would cease.
- Shi'i Devotional Approaches: Karimi and Mazani (2016), in *Theological Research Quarterly*, examined Shi'i devotional

approaches to the problem of evil. This research typically focuses on the role of suffering in the lives of the infallible Imams (Ahl al-Bayt) as a model of piety, patience, and submission (*Sabr* and *Taslīm*). In this view, suffering is not merely a test, but a means of attaining the highest spiritual stations (*maqāmāt*) and a profound connection with God, thereby linking the problem of evil directly to the practical morality of the worshipper.

- Qur'anic Discourse on Good and Evil: Serajzadeh (2021) analyzed manifestations of moral good and evil in Qur'anic discourse in the *Qur'an and Hadith Research Journal*. This type of study provides a textual basis by isolating verses that describe human conflict, the nature of *Dunyā* (the world), and the consequences of moral choices, essential for understanding the Qur'an's direct voice on the matter.
- Anthropological and Eschatological Studies: A significant portion of Islamic scholarship focuses on Qur'anic Anthropology (the nature of man) and Eschatology (the afterlife and eternal happiness). Works on human nature often highlight the inherent tension within man: the *Rūh* (spirit) striving for perfection, and the *Nafs* (ego/self) inclined toward transgression (al-'Alaq, 6), which provides the foundation for the Qur'an's explanation of moral evil as an internal human product. Eschatological studies underscore the ultimate purpose of life—eternal felicity and Divine Pleasure (*Ridwān*)—which serves as the ultimate justification for the transient hardships (*fitan*) of this world.

The existing literature confirms that the Qur'an addresses all the elements necessary for a theodicy—free will, the nature of the world, divine purpose, and ultimate destiny. However, the absence of broader systematic research that *synthesizes* these elements into a dedicated ethical-pedagogical framework is notable. This article argues that, from the Qur'anic standpoint, a proper understanding of human nature and the nature of the world provides the foundation for interpreting, explaining, and situating the problem of evil. Moreover, uncovering the higher purposes of creation and attending to the realities of the afterlife

shed light on the divine wisdom underlying the existence of evil, specifically as a mechanism for moral growth and the attainment of eternal happiness.

4. Discussion

Since evil occurs within material life and among humans, understanding humanity and the world helps clarify its nature.

Discussion: The Nature and Role of Phenomena Related to Evils from the Qur'an's Viewpoint

Since evil occurs within material life and among humans, understanding humanity and the world helps clarify its nature. Adopting a descriptive-analytical method, the present study examines the nature and function of key factors associated with evil in the Qur'an, focusing on Qur'anic anthropology, Qur'anic cosmology, and the Qur'anic conception of human felicity. Through this approach, the study aims to articulate the Qur'an's ethical-pedagogical perspective on the issue.

4.1. Qur'anic Anthropology: The Causal-Human Components

To address the problem of evil, the Qur'an focuses heavily on anthropological elements. Ignoring human nature and lacking insight into humanity's dimensions causes people to form unrealistic expectations and demands beyond or against their true capacities. The Qur'an identifies several causal-human components leading to evil:

4.1.1. The Causal-Human Component: Free Will

The first causal-human component of the problem of evil is human free will. According to the Quranic perspective, humans have free will in their actions (al-Kahf, 29: "The truth is from your Lord, so whoever wills, let him believe; and whoever wills, let him disbelieve"). Every command, judgment, and system of reward and punishment depends on this freedom. The Wise Commander considers the individual's ability and power when issuing commands (Tabatabā'ī, 1983).

For an action to be moral, there must be different options. The individual must be able to choose one, and, on acting, they are held accountable. Free will in the face of contradictory choices makes human actions moral or immoral. Moral evil, therefore, originates in the *misuse* of this divinely granted freedom, echoing the free-will defense.

4.1.2. The Causal-Human Component: Inclination to Transgression

Another causal-human component of evil, from the Qur'an's perspective, relates to a tendency within human nature: the inclination toward rebellion and transgression (al-'Alaq, 6: "Nay, but man does indeed transgress"). Excessive human desires influence how people choose and act. Without proper control by deterrent forces (such as God-consciousness or the experience of hardship/evil), these desires lead to wider evils and conflicts. This inclination is linked to the unrestrained *Nafs* (self/ego).

4.1.3. The Causal-Human Component: Injustice and Ignorance

Another aspect of human nature, according to the Qur'an, is that humans are unjust (*Zalūm*) and ignorant (*Jahūl*) (al-Ahzāb, 62). Epistemological gaps sometimes mislead people about true happiness. In ignorance, they gather around false forms of happiness, causing injustice to themselves and others. Some commentators say the reason for human injustice and ignorance is the dominance of anger and lust. Epistemological filters, such as ignorance, can mislead people when they search for perfection. Wills influenced by anger, lust, and desire prevent humans from reaching the heights of perfection.

4.1.4. The Causal-Human Component: Conflict and Disagreement

Another characteristic of human beings is pronounced conflict and disagreement. This can be seen as the logical sum of the previous three points. These conflicts fall into the category of moral evils in the philosophy of religion. They include many minor and major pains among humans.

Although the Qur'an attributes the roots of human conflict to the inherently acquisitive and self-seeking nature of human beings, it offers an ethical orientation in explaining the divine wisdom behind such tensions. These conflicts, according to the Qur'an, function as a means of preventing greater evils and widespread corruption, and thus constitute a form of divine grace toward humankind (al-Baqarah: 251; al-Hajj: 40). Moral evils emerge from the dynamics of human opposition and struggle. Yet, at the same time, this very process of mutual counteraction functions as a mechanism of moral preservation: while it may expose human beings to material hardship, it contributes to the endurance and vitality of their spiritual life.

The notion of conflict has also been of central importance in Islamic philosophy. Philosophers have argued that without contrariety, the continuous effusion of divine grace from the bountiful Source would not be possible; material existence would cease, and countless entities would remain in pure non-being (Mullā Ṣadrā, 1981; Muṭahharī, 1998; Shihāb al-Dīn Suhrawardī, 1996).

4.2. Qur'anic World-view: The Cosmological Components

From a Quranic perspective, worldly life (Dunyā) has characteristics that may not align with human expectations. God consistently repeats these characteristics throughout the Divine Book and urges people not to be content with the apparent life of this world. The central components of worldly life in this paradigm are listed below:

4.2.1. Worldly Life is a Trial, Temptation, and Test

Worldly life is a trial, temptation, and test (*Fitnah*) for everyone. The Holy Qur'an emphasizes in numerous verses that all human beings are tested. Such an approach is, on the one hand, in line with a general evaluation and assessment in the divine system of reward and punishment so that everyone is measured in this test and, in the Quranic term, the "Vile is separated from the good" (al-Anfāl, 37). The tests establish clear evidence based on human actions to be a manifest proof in the system of reckoning deeds.

Also, from the Quranic perspective, trials are one of the secrets of the return of negligent human beings to God and their establishment on the path of happiness and perfection. The possibility of some negligent people returning to their original human nature exists through trials (al-A'rāf, 168; al-Rūm, 41).

It is important to note that, from the Quranic perspective, not only are calamities and problems considered a trial, but even apparent material blessings—referred to as the "Adornment of the worldly life"—are also a type of trial and test (Tāhā, 131). The test of the servant is sometimes by means of something he loves (testing gratitude), and sometimes by means of something he dislikes (testing patience) (Turayhī, 1996).

4.2.2. Worldly Life Leads to Negligence

Worldly life has a nature that leads to negligence (*Ghaflah*) of the ultimate goal of human beings. This is referred to as "Play (*La'b*)" and "Diversion (*Lahw*)" in the Qur'an (al-An'ām, 32; al-Hadīd, 20). People

are warned that the intoxicating negligence of this world should not keep them from remembering God. Numerous verses emphasize that worldly life is accompanied by deception, delusion, and negligence, and human beings may suffer setbacks on their path to perfection, which may be caused by the ego's desires or Satan.

4.2.3. *Worldly Life is Perishable and Fleeting*

Worldly life is perishable and fleeting. Qur'anic verses emphasize that everyone tastes death, and the life of this world is merely a deceptive enjoyment, and the final return is to God (Āli 'Imrān, 185; al-Anbīyā', 35). The perishability of the world is likened to the disappearance of vegetation after rain (al-Hadīd, 20).

Death—even if considered one of the evils by philosophers of religion—is a secret for living morally. The termination of this existence signifies the scarcity of the enjoyment of this world. Instead of focusing on the fleeting enjoyment of the world, one should look towards a lasting enjoyment that is with God (al-Nahl, 96). Attention to the perishability of the world and human beings, and the return to God, are emphasized in numerous Qur'anic verses as a moral approach and has been the focus of the Prophets and the Divine Saints. As Imam Ali (AS) stated, "And death is sufficient for you as an admonition..." (Mufid, 1992).

4.3. *The Purposes of Creation and Eternal Happiness*

Any statement about creation and its beings in the Quranic paradigm is influenced by factors related to the ultimate goals of creation. The Qur'an emphasizes that human creation is attributed to purposes and interests that return to the created being. The Qur'an, in the form of a rhetorical question, rejects the notion of purposeless creation, immediately pointing to the issue of the return of human beings to God (al-Mu'minūn, 15). Rather, the ultimate purpose of human creation is the true servitude and worship of God (*Ibādah*) (al-Dhārīyāt, 56) and the return of all human beings to God.

Accordingly, the problem of evils, as trials and tribulations, manifests the extent of the individual's servitude and the degree of their worship. Souls that successfully emerge from these tests and reach the station of *Tazkīyah* (purification of the self) will rely on the seat of eternal success and salvation (al-A'�ā, 14).

In fact, one of the significant insights of evil lies in this very point: that it can become a source of controlling human beings and of nurturing and perfecting human souls. This ensures their eternal happiness, an intellectual and permanent pleasure surpassing sensory pleasures.

The highest happiness from the Qur'an's perspective is Divine Pleasure (*Ridwān*), which is considered superior to everything, even Paradise itself (al-Tawbah, 72). This perfection is understood as conformity and compatibility with the good specific to the rational soul: comprehending and perceiving the Absolute Good. This is while the critics of the problem of evil often confine happiness to sensory pleasures, neglecting the Hereafter as the inward and reality of human life (al-Rūm, 7).

4.4 The Problem of Evil and the Qur'an's Moral-Educational Approach
It is established that the cause of evils arises from the nature of the phenomena related to it, namely, the world and human beings. However, these evils are ultimately justifiable within a moral framework, which we call the wisdom of evils. By discovering the wisdom of the problem of evil, we achieve the Qur'an's moral approach to this issue.

In reality, the Qur'an distinguishes between the ontological and epistemological factors of the problem of evil. Ontologically, it attributes it to the nature and actions of human beings and the nature of the world. At the same time, it links the rationality and justification of this dilemma to the most fundamental condition of the individual human being: their eternal happiness.

The connection of the problem of evil with the moral development of human beings—especially the enhancement of the spirit of patience (*Sabr*), attention to the Origin and the Resurrection, and ultimately, the dependence of human ultimate salvation and happiness on it—is clearly observable in the following verses:

"And We will surely test you with something of fear and hunger and a loss of wealth and lives and fruits; and give glad tidings to the patient ones: those who, when a disaster strikes them, say, 'Indeed we belong to God, and indeed to Him we will return.' Those are the ones upon who

are blessings and mercy from their Lord and it is those who are the guided" (al-Baqarah, 155-157).

These verses raise the issue of testing and trial, relate it to the problem of evil, draw attention to a moral approach (patience and remembrance of return), and finally consider the guidance and ultimate happiness of human beings as the result of the preceding components.

The Qur'an mentions several moral fruits of evil, including:

- Patience (*Sabr*): Patience itself has multiple blessings, including God's love (Āli 'Imrān, 146), God's help (al-Baqarah, 153), and unending reward (al-Zumar, 10). The ultimate reward resulting from patience over evils is guidance.
- Self-Control or Piety (*Taqwā*): This is the heightened awareness of God resulting from the awareness of one's vulnerability during hardship, leading to moral restraint.
- Strong and Firm Resolve (*'Azm*): Difficulties necessitate strengthening the will to adhere to moral principles despite adversity.

Asceticism (*Zuhd*) towards the world is another moral effect, defined by Imam Ali (AS) as: "That you do not grieve over what has escaped you and do not exult over what He has given you" (al-Hadīd, 22 and 23). Hardships turn the human heart away from the love of the fleeting world toward the greater good, which is the love and desire for the Creator.

The moral approach to the problem of evil also provides the possibility of establishing a system of value judgment regarding human behavior based on their performance in the face of momentous events, a system that would not be possible without such events (al-Kahf, 7).

The logical summation of the core Qur'anic propositions (human nature is excessive, the world is fleeting and a test, purpose of creation is worship, and the ultimate goal is eternal happiness) leads to the following conclusions about the wisdom of evil:

- A) The problem of evils is in the direction of the moral control of human beings and the regulation of their expansionist and excessive behaviors.
- B) The problem of evils is profoundly connected to human happiness, and the moral approach to evils necessitates a correct analysis of the ultimate goal of human beings.

C) This problem constitutes an important aspect of remembrance and admonition regarding the Origin, the ultimate goal of creation, and also the point of return for human beings.

D) Patience and endurance, which are outstanding moral virtues, are capable of flourishing and evaluation through pains, sorrows, and various trials. Without the existence of pains and sorrows, patience and endurance are meaningless, and the possibility of being adorned with this important moral quality is negated.

5. Findings and Conclusion

As seen, the problem of evil is profoundly connected to two related phenomena: human beings and the world. From a Quranic perspective, the world has a nature that leads to negligence and intoxication. This meaning is emphasized by the Quran with words such as "Deception," "Play," "Diversion," and "Falsehood." Also, from the point of view of Divine discourse, human beings want to tread a path free of obstacles and do not want anything to stop them on it. This is while such a will leads to conflicts and contradictions, which, although inherent to their nature, also aid in their moral perfection.

The Holy Quran, while confirming that the nature of the world is mixed with pain, sorrow, and trials, relates the occurrence of evils to human guidance, happiness, and perfection. Human trials, first and foremost, ensure that they are protected from many transgressions inherent to human nature. Secondly, conflicts and differences on Earth prevent major and uncontrollable corruption from occurring. Furthermore, these apparent evils become a means for human material and spiritual perfection, leading them to seek solutions to improve the current situation and thus create new advancements for them. The problem of death (as one of the evils from the perspective of philosophers of religion), while signifying the end of the material existence, is the beginning of a new and eternal life and a path for the reckoning of deeds. It is also simultaneously the final point and end to potential human transgression and rebellion. Attention to it can play an important role in preventing and correcting errors. For this reason, in Islamic texts, the remembrance of death is emphasized, and the educational effects of remembering death are considered significant and noteworthy.

The Quranic approach to justifying human trials and the "Problem of evil" is that these problems not only play a role in the path to human perfection and happiness, but also a decisive one. It is the collection of these hardships and calamities that, firstly, makes human beings aware of the ultimate truth and, secondly, of the perishability and corruption of this existence. Reaching a good (pure) life and eternal happiness is through Divine tests, which sometimes manifest in the context of various human calamities and trials. The spiritual and moral self-purification of human beings finds no meaning without these trials. It is in the context of the occurrence of evils that the Divine test appears, and the individual, based on how they take a stand against these events, can achieve levels of perfection and degrees of moral virtues.

The Holy Quran explicitly considers the wisdom of human evils and trials to be within a moral-educational approach, focusing on the cultivation of souls and the nurturing of human spirits. The ultimate goal of these trials is considered to be moral indicators such as: Enhancing the spirit of patience and certainty, strengthening human self-control, strengthening the will and firmness of human resolve, preventing major and irreparable corruptions, creating a system of value judgment based on the manner and results of human actions in the face of difficulties, recognizing those with better deeds and behavior, and a pious life that determines human eternal happiness with attention to the Origin and the Resurrection.

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