CHAPTER FIVE

THE WISE PURPOSE AND ORIGIN OF EVIL

*Ibn Taymiyya and the Explanation of Evil in Islamic Theodicies*

The question of evil (sharr) in Ibn Taymiyya’s writings has not received serious study. Before examining the pertinent texts, it will prove useful to fill in some background on how the preceding Islamic tradition explains evil. A common theme is the educational and disciplinary role of evil in advancing the religious life. Already noted in the Introduction were al-Māturīdī’s view that evil is a tool of God’s wisdom to lead humankind to knowledge of God’s existence and the Sufi notion that evil and suffering are instruments of God’s discipline on the spiritual path. Similar ideas are found in the free-will theodicy of the Mu’tazili ʿAbd al-Jabbār who maintains that God inflicts pain not only as punishment for sins but also for the purposes of testing, warning and deterring.¹

In the best-of-all-possible-worlds theodicy of Ibn Sinā, all things are good from the vantage point of the whole. Pure or absolute evil does not exist, but relative or partial evil does and is inherent in the perfection of the created order. In the section on providence in *al-Shifāʾ*, Ibn Sinā explains that evil, which he understands metaphysically as imperfection (naqṣ) and ʿadam—a term that I will translate variously as “nonexistence,” “privation” or “lack”—is necessary to some things for them to be what they are. By way of example, he argues that burning is necessary to the perfection of fire even if fire occasionally burns someone. If such things did not involve evil, they would in fact be something else, but they must exist as they are for the maintenance of the universal order. In addition to the nonexistence of absolute evil and the necessity of relative evil to the perfection of things, Ibn Sinā also speaks quantitatively about evil. He affirms that the amount of evil in the universe is very small compared to the great amount of good.²

¹ Heemskerk, *Suffering in Muʿtazilite Theology*, 151–6.
Other parts of the Islamic tradition elaborate further answers as to why evil is necessary for the best possible order. In Ḣyā‘ ʿulūm al-dīn, al-Ghazālī roots the necessity of evil in the principle that things cannot be known except by their opposites. Health is not enjoyed without illness; the blessed in Paradise would not know their blessedness without Hell; and perfection is not known without imperfection. Ibn ʿArabi employs an additional explanation for evil, what Arthur Lovejoy in his classic The Great Chain of Being calls the “principle of plenitude,” which locates the good in the greatest possible variety. For Ibn ʿArabi, God bestows existence on the cosmos for the great good of making Himself known. Evil and imperfection, which are paradoxically no more than privation and otherness from the sole reality of God and yet real in that they thwart God’s Law and human purposes, are necessary in order to afford God the possibility to manifest the infinite diversity, the great plenitude, of His names. Everything in existence reflects a divine name such as All-Merciful, Giver of Life, Giver of Death, Honorer, Humiliator and so forth. These names extend in number beyond the traditional ninety-nine to infinity. Nonetheless, Ibn ʿArabi maintains that, out of courtesy for God, we should address God only with names that He has revealed. We should not, for example, call God Liar or Ignorant.

The principle of plenitude and the idea that things are known only by their opposites do not appear explicitly in Ibn Taymiyya’s thought on evil, but he does speak of evil’s educational qualities, its logical necessity in the nature of the world, its relativity and its quantitative insignificance. However, congruent with his juridical concern to speak well of God, the shaykh’s primary interest is finding ways not to attribute evil to God even though it is God who is ultimately responsible for the world being the way it is. In the end his refuge is God’s wise purpose.

The first section below examines Ibn Taymiyya’s three-fold typology for attributing evil. This includes discussion of his views on God’s names. The second section investigates the degree to which he believes that God’s wise

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1 Al-Ghazālī, Ḣyā‘ ʿulūm al-dīn, 4:258–9 (at the end of “Kitāb al-tawḥīd wa al-tawakkul”). Ormsby, Thedicy, 40 and 64–9, provides a translation and analysis of this text. The idea that things are known through their opposites is also found in al-Ḥallāj and others, especially in reflection on the fate of Iblīs. On this, see Awn, Satan’s Tragedy and Redemption, 122–150.
