

On the Approach of the Tradition of *Irfān* Towards the Problem of Evil

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In this paper, an attempt has been made to elucidate how the tradition of irfān (that is, the tradition of metaphysics within the Islamic tradition) (dis)solves the problem of evil and suffering. The approach of irfān chiefly lies in its establishment of the primacy of the “nature” of the Absolute (that is, Zāt) rather than (the theological notion of) the “arbitrary freedom” (to create). Thus, the reality of the “manifestation” of the infinite possibilities of the Absolute is placed first, within which the question of the individual suffering is then debated. Since the Absolute is the abode of all possibilities, the “manifestation” inevitably gives rise to “disequilibrium.” However, by locating the dialectic of Jalāl and Jamāl within one wholesome Absolute (Zāt), the terrifying multiplicity and the individuality of suffering are avoided.

Keywords:

irfān, evil, Absolute, Zāt, dialectic

Introduction

This article delves into the problem of evil and suffering apropos of the traditional metaphysics.ⁱ The aim is to understand how traditional metaphysics approaches this problem in order to dissolve it. But before we do that, let us first understand the important background within which the traditional metaphysics perceives reality and the existence of suffering within it.

The very first point that is to be registered is that the source or the origin or the essence or the ground of reality is precisely what is referred to as “God” (understood as Absolute here) within traditional metaphysics.ⁱⁱ Seyyed Hossein Nasr’s essay “God is Reality” in his book *The Need for a Sacred Science*ⁱⁱⁱ best explains this point. By the phrase “God is Reality” is meant that “God” is what we refer to whenever we refer to whatever is ultimately “Real”, that is, *al-Haq*, in relation

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to which everything else enjoys only “relative” reality, that is to say, borrowed reality. Defined this way, “God” becomes self-evidently true. As the Qur’an rhetorically asks, “Can there be any possibility of doubt regarding God?”^{iv} Thus, God is referred to as whatever is, ultimately, truly true in the final analysis. Qur’an’s description of God as *al-samad* comprehensively clarifies this point, that is, by God what is meant is the ultimately independent, self-sustaining, essential “substance” which is the source/ground of everything else. To be sure, by the term “God,” what is meant here (within the context of traditional metaphysics) is “Absolute” (or *Zāt*). Now, let us proceed to the main problematic at hand.

The Primacy of the “Nature” of Absolute

God as “Absolute” (by virtue of being absolute) is “infinite” (as finitude would otherwise be a limitation). The source of everything is the *Absolute* — the origin, or the essence of everything. In its infinitude, God contains all possibilities/potentialities (*mumkināt*). Among these infinite possibilities, indeed, there is a possibility of manifestation, that is to say, the possibility of self-disclosure and thus existence/world comes to be. It is in this context that the Sufis refer to one often-repeated Prophetic tradition according to which the *Absolute* describes itself as a “treasure” and thus desired to be known. To put it philosophically, it is in the nature of the Absolute as infinite to manifest, and thus we are here.^v The tradition of *Irfān*, therefore, describes existence/creation as the manifestation of the multiplicity of the Divine names/possibilities.^{vi}

This is the first important point to bear in mind apropos of the problem of evil. That is because the truly radical interrogative implication of the problem of evil is not the question of the presence of evil in the world and the proportionate reward, but rather the query as to why God “created” the world in the first place. To be sure, this query is enabled by the theological notion of God creating the world out of sheer arbitrary freedom, which otherwise could have been avoided (by choice). Thus, the approach of theodicies (banking upon the idea of “fruitful result” that may come about in the afterlife, in the context of the world as a soul-making process) is rendered problematic simply because the question could be levied on the whole trajectory itself, that is, from the creation to soul-making process to the final judgment. Since the whole trajectory is the product of God’s sheer freedom (as per the theological account), it could very well have been avoided. Were it not for God’s *choice* of creating the world, there would not have

been any suffering at all. To be sure, this query fructifies within a form of thinking which privileges the (arbitrary) “freedom” of God over and above the reality of the “nature” of God.

In fact, freedom of God is rooted in God; in the “nature” of God. The traditional metaphysical worldview registers the primacy of the “nature” of God in contradistinction with the mainstream theological account, which privileges God’s sheer freedom.^{vii} Indeed, it is in the very nature of God as “infinite” that the possibility of manifestation fructifies, and thus there is creation. Qur’anic dictum of *wa huwa alā kullī shai’in qadēr* (God has dominion over all things), as per the traditional metaphysics, is read in terms of “All-possibility.” Since Absolute is “all possibilities,” therefore, one of the possibilities, inevitably, would be the possibility of “manifestation” and thus the creation is a necessary overflowing of the overabundance (intensive infinitude) of Absolute.

The Dialectic of *Jalāl* and *Jamāl*

The Divine names (or possibilities of the Absolute) presented in the Qur’an contain both – what are known as – the names of *Jalāl*, that is, the names of majesty, power, distance/otherness from the creation and as well as the names of *Jamāl*, that is, the names of gentle, intimate nature. The names of *Jalāl* establish “transcendence” (or *tanzih*) of God (his otherness or sheer unknowability), whereas the *Jamālī* names establish “immanence” (or *tashbih*), that is, the relatedness between the source and the manifestation.^{viii} The world in front of us is a dialectic of these Divine names. The present world, therefore, is a dialectic of life and death (*Muhyī* and *Mumēt*), day and night, meeting and farewell, light and darkness, pain and pleasure – what the old Chinese wisdom refers to as *yin* and *yang*, that is, the world is run by the wheel of opposite traits, which in the larger scheme of things are complementary to each other and together go to make one wholesome reality.

Having understood this, we come to another crucial point: it is only in the nature of “Absolute”/infinite (*Zāt*) that it is “complete” in itself (with all the possibilities within it), and thus the Absolute is the only harmonious equilibrium. The moment manifestation takes place, that is to say, the materialization of the distance from the Absolute, and the moment different possibilities come to fruition, that is, come to be “individually,” then different things in creation

start reflecting different names of God such that none of the existing things in the cosmos exhausts all the possibilities of the Absolute within it (save the potentiality of *al-insān al-Kāmil*). An animal realizes certain sets of possibilities, a tree some others, and so on and so forth. The world, therefore, becomes a place of “disequilibrium.” It is this disequilibrium that gives rise to what humans refer to as “evil” in their anthropocentric setting. That is because nothing on the dialectic plane (creation) is complete or absolute or whole or harmonious or perfect; in other words, nothing within the creation is God. As Jesus would say, “Only God is Good.”^x

One of the names of God in the Qur’an is *az-zār*, which means “the one who inflicts harm”; now, if we visit the jungles, for instance, we will be able to witness how the wild animals tear each other apart – the manifestation of *az-zār*. In general, we may note that the whole movement of life or nature is itself actualized by death. Mircea Eliade^x & Joseph Campbell^{xi} show how traditional people saw life and death as complementary to each other, reflected in their circular conception of time and their complex rituals of hunting & sacrifice. Life enables death, and death enables life. To be sure, Nietzsche’s meditations on the question of life and suffering also culminated in a form of circular conception of time in accordance with his idea of the “eternal return,”^{xii} where life and death are not polar opposites but two halves of the same whole.

Thus, when we understand the “creative plane” as the radiant display of Divine names, one is instantly transported to the perspective of one wholesome (Divine) *spirit* (underlying all manifestations), and consequently, one begins to see the dialectic as a whole, which solves the frustrating dualities and binaries. This is the primary approach of *irfān* towards the problem of evil.

Now, let us elucidate upon this point in the backdrop of the above discussion. Traditional metaphysics (as alluded to above) (dis)solves the problem of suffering by the partnership of *Tragedy* and *Comedy*. In *Tragedy*, human beings witness the difficulties of life; one witnesses terrifying multiplicity and the dialectic of opposites. But then, on the other hand, more importantly, it is complemented with the second part, that is, the human beings realize the one true *spirit* beneath all manifestations, which is realizing its diverse potentialities, and thus, at once, human beings transcend the whole wheel of terrifying multiplicity. It is only when human beings perceive themselves as ontologically disjointed from *Reality* (as a whole) that existential

angst, alienation, and horror materialize. When one dies, one does not fall into the pit of “alien realm,” so to speak. We come, live within, and go back to the same single essential reality, and thus, effectively, there is no reason for alienation ever.

As mentioned above, Eliade points out that the traditional people saw time cyclically in the sense that chaos is followed by order and vice versa; night is not permanent, life comes out of death and goes back to it, followed by rebirth again. The terrifying nature of suffering in the modern world (according to Eliade) owes itself to the “linear” conception of time. The “suffering situations” are seen as sudden, token, unlucky, and unique events when, in fact, they are an equal part of one wholesome reality. The cyclical view of time makes life bearable because life and death are in partnership, making each other possible.

Realizing the essence of one true spirit beneath all the creative manifestations is like *waking up* from a dream (of apparent multiplicity), or it amounts to a “successful interpretation” of a “nightmarish dream” which instantly leads to “cure.” This is how Ibn ‘Arabi perceives the nature of reality in his masterpiece work.^{xiii} The perception of this essential unity (at a fundamental level) helps human beings gain a holistic insight into the whole drama of existence; human beings (as the partners of the *spirit*) participate in God’s disclosure and expression and thus attain liberating/enlightening transcendence.

The day-to-day detailed individual concrete suffering may never go away completely simply because we continue to live as bodies and psyches within the space-time order, but the deep realization of the *spirit*, which is the innermost essence of everything that exists, which alone eternally abides, and manifests itself in diverse shapes and forms, helps human beings gain a new transformative perspective. Connecting with, or participating in this *spirit*, which deep down is the one single fundamental reality beneath all the apparent multiplicity, helps one transcend the individual fragmentary suffering situations (seen separately).

The objective of *catharsis*, for example, within the Greek plays actually trace back to the mystery play of *Dionysus*, wherein the “participant,” in the ritual, identified not with the “individual dying body” but rather with the very “life” itself, that is to say, the very principle of “continuous life,” that is, God or eternal source.^{xiv} In other words, one’s individual self, as a

particular manifestation, may not be “perfect,” but the very principle of life is. Individuals are mortal, but the principle of life continues to exist. If one is able to identify with it, one lives eternally with it. Through it, one silently witnesses the dance of creation. This is the *aesthetic* dissolution of the problem of suffering in the *Yes-saying* of Nietzsche.

One recalls here a pertinent example that Viktor E. Frankl provides in his well-known work *Man's Search For Meaning* regarding a woman who was aware of her fate; she knew that she would soon die a tragic death in one of the concentration camps, and yet she was consolable. As she shared with Frankl, the sole source of solace for her (at such a critical juncture) was her identification with the larger collective life itself, which would continue to live even after her death. Frankl records her response in detail:

This young woman knew that she would die in the next few days. But when I talked to her she was cheerful in spite of this knowledge. "I am grateful that fate has hit me so hard," she told me ... Pointing through the window of the hut, she said, "This tree here is the only friend I have in my loneliness." Through that window she could see just one branch of a chestnut tree, and on the branch were two blossoms. "I often talk to this tree," she said to me. I was startled and didn't quite know how to take her words. Was she delirious? Did she have occasional hallucinations? Anxiously I asked her if the tree replied. "Yes." What did it say to her? She answered, "It said to me, 'I am here—I am here—I am life, eternal life.'"^{xv}

This recognition of the eternal principle of life shifts the person's centre of attention from “individual” manifestations to the *One* universal life itself, which celebrates its disclosure on the creative plane, and this participation/recognition/realization of the individual opens up access to ecstatic joy. To be sure, the “enlightened” person continues to live within the whirlpool of the dialectic life, but now has attained an essential transcendent insight. Qur'an tells us that the world is a *play* (a game), but then it also provides us with the continuous background understanding of *ākhirah*, that is, that which is “later” or “behind” or “deeper,” that which gives us knowledge of the essential reality.

Human being, according to the metaphysics of Ibn 'Arabi, is a hierarchic being.^{xvi} A human being is an intelligence (spirit), a body (matter), and a psyche (temperament or sentimentality). Usually, human beings see life through a “sentimental” perspective, but life or Reality as a whole rises above sentimentalism. Reality is “total” or “whole,” comprising all the opposing elements, while its source lies beyond this creation; its source is *Beyond-Being*, which is pure from all

dialectic. This is the metaphysical truth available to the insight of pure intelligence (*ayn-al-qalb*). The “Absolute,” owing to the possibility of manifestation, manifests; it is independent and above all sentimentalism, that is, logically prior to all dialectic. It is only later, when creation happens, that we are invited to make sense of it. Our sentiments do not override reality as it is, that is, *zāt* or *ipseity* or *isness*. The givenness of the given just is. *Zāt* does not have localized, anthropocentric purposes; it just is. This point will be further developed in the next section.

If this whole discussion seems a little abstract to us, let us look at our own selves; when we look inward into our own selves, what do we find there? We ourselves are composed of the light and dark, good and bad, *yin* and *yang*, while at the centre of our being, there lies oneness absorbing all contradictions.

A human being, who recognizes this truth, namely the worldly dialectic operative at the periphery of the circle whilst at the same time registers the Divine silence/rest/eternity/permanence at the centre of the circle (that is to say, the one principle of *spirit* at the essence of apparent multiplicity), effectively knows the total Reality comprehensively. He continues to live within the world of the dialectic, but at the same time, remains connected to the Divine centre (metaphysical truth) and thus, as a result, attains the repose of being. To quote Campbell:

The devotee is expected to contemplate the [both aspects of Reality; Tragedy and comedy]. Through this exercise his spirit is purged of its infantile, inappropriate sentimentalities and resentments, his mind opened to the inscrutable presence which exists, not primarily as ‘good’ and ‘bad’ with respect to his childlike human convenience, his weal and woe, but as the law and image of the nature of being.^{xvii}

On Human Existence and the Question of Meaning and Purpose

The approach of the tradition of *irfān* towards the problem of suffering can be elucidated by its approach towards the question of the purpose of human beings. Let us first provide the background of the two levels of religion as laid out by Ibn ‘Arabi in his chapter on Jacob (*Yāqūb*) in his *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*^{xviii}, in the backdrop of which the problematic at hand is situated. Basically, for Ibn Arabi, there are two types of religion corresponding to the two planes of

reality, that is, the relative plane (the plane of creation) & the absolute plane (the plane of transcendence). The first level of religion, what is known as the “ethical religion” (on the relative plane), attends to the dialectic realm. What this effectively means is the following: when the Absolute or *Zāt* or Godhead discloses itself as “divinity” (Universal manifestation), the polarity of the creator-created comes into being, within which the “ethical religion” becomes operative. That is, for Ibn ‘Arabi, the plane of “ethical religion” exists in the present world of dualities (dialectic of “good” & “bad”) constituted by normativity or a prescriptive element. This is also the usual understanding of religion as popularly conceived.

But, then, Ibn ‘Arabi moves on to talk about – what we may refer to as – the “ontological religion,” that is, the religion that deals with the (metaphysical) *Reality*, beyond all dualities, binaries, and the dialectic. The reality that *precedes* the creation of the dialectic, that is, the Absolute (*Zāt*). From the perspective of the absolute plane, every act or event (as a possibility of *Being*) in its essence is “sanctioned” by the “absolute” – the abode of all possibilities. That is, since every possibility is a possibility within the absolute/infinite (*Zāt*), therefore, they will inevitably be sanctioned. This, therefore, is a different kind of “sanction” or “prescription” apropos of the prescription of the “ethical religion.”

Having laid out the background, let us now take up the question of the “purpose” of human being or life or existence – one of the most important questions indeed, which in turn will elucidate the approach of traditional metaphysics towards the problem of evil. The tradition of *irfān* approaches the question of the “purpose” of human beings from the same above-mentioned two planes of reality, that is, the absolute plane and the dialectic/relative plane. On the absolute plane, we cannot superimpose any anthropocentric “purposes” on God as if the absolute had to do this or that, had to achieve this or that, had to get rid of this or that. Since absolute is infinite, therefore, no anthropocentric purposes can be superimposed onto it. It is infinite in itself. It is not deficient in anything. It cannot have particular projects to fulfil or complete itself.

The Absolute manifests simply because it is absolute. It is in the very nature of the infinite to manifest because “manifestation” or disclosure is inevitably one of the possibilities of the infinite. Therefore, it is the result of the very nature of the Absolute to manifest rather than a project to attain something new or to get rid of something old. There are no anthropocentric ends

that we may presuppose here because that would inevitably impose limitations on the absolute, which otherwise is infinite. But the point is that once the manifestations (of absolute) do come to fruition and when the dialectic plane does come into being, that is, when the polarity of the day and night, creator and created, good and evil, comes into being – and the human beings find themselves caught up in the whirlpool of dialectic/world/creation, it is only then that the Qur’anic purpose of “test” comes into being. As in, human beings open their eyes within the dialectic plane, which is preceded by the Absolute and its *ipseity*. Thus, the Absolute is logically prior (without any anthropocentric purposes); it is only later when the Absolute manifests (in accordance with its nature) that the “test” of humans comes into being, as the Qur’an says, “it is He who created death & life in order to test which amongst you does good deeds.”^{xix} Therefore, for the tradition of *irfān*, the purpose of the creation itself or existence itself is not the trial of human agency, but rather on the absolute plane there are no such purposes whatsoever; it is only later when the dialectic comes into being (thanks to the manifestations of the Absolute) that the purpose of “test” becomes operative.

In other words, the Absolute (and its nature) comes first; it is primary. It is only later when the manifestation takes place and the dialectic of good and evil comes into being^{xx} that the humans are asked to side with the “good” (or the gentle names of God, that is to say, the *jamāl* of God) and avoid the invitation of the wrath (that is, the harsh names of God, that is to say, the *jalāl* of God). In other words, once the dialectic (of *jalāl* and *jamāl*) is operative, both *mudhil* and *hādhi* are in action; it is only then that humans are asked to invoke the action of *hādhi* and avoid the action of *mudhil*.

Conclusion

So, how does this discussion shed light on the question of evil and suffering? According to traditional metaphysics, as mentioned, the creation is a result of the very nature of the Absolute; it is a pre-given “given” that cannot be circumvented. We begin with this “given.” Once this givenness of the given is registered, it is followed by the understanding of the nature of the dialectic that is operative within creation. It is only then that the dichotomy of good and evil becomes functional. This is what we referred to above as Ibn ‘Arabi’s reading of reality as a dream warranting interpretation.

Hence, what is effectively taking place within the traditional metaphysics is chiefly a transposition of the theological debate on the problem of evil and God's freedom, in the sense that it changes the coordinates of the debate by giving up the reference point of "creation ex nihilo" which very rightly engenders the query as to why would God randomly create us in order to test us, as in, what would God achieve by such an "decision" when in fact he is complete in himself? Were it not for such a "decision," goes the query, there would not have been any possibility of any evil or suffering. Since God was fully capable of not "choosing" to create, His mercy should have entailed the absence of any ground for the fructification of suffering.

Traditional metaphysics, on the other hand, begins with the pre-given nature of the Absolute (which abundantly overflows by virtue of its "intensive infinitude"). Manifestation is its nature, and thus an infinite variety of beings come into being. This is *presupposed* rather than framed as an "arbitrary act." Once this is registered, it is followed by the realization of the reality of dialectic (operative within the world). It is this reality of the dialectic that crystallizes into the corresponding debate of the "way of life" (*dīn*) that is supposed to ensure the best possible smooth transition through the dialectic. It is in this latter aspect that the "ethical religion" (*Shari'ah*) comes into effect. Indeed, the root meaning of the word *Shari'ah* refers to the "shortest possible path to an oasis in a desert."

References

ⁱ By traditional metaphysics we mean the school of *irfān* within the Islamic tradition (as represented by the figure of Ibn 'Arabi).

ⁱⁱ As the Qur'an alludes to the fact that God has innumerable names or designations. See Qur'an (7:180).

ⁱⁱⁱ Nasr, *The Need for a Sacred Science*, 1993.

^{iv} Qur'an 14:10.

^v Nasr, *The Need for a Sacred Science*, pp. 6-7.

^{vi} Chittick, *Ibn 'Arabi: Heir to the Prophets*, pp. 20-22.

^{vii} Schuon, "Dilemmas of Theological Speculation."

^{viii} Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, pp. 34-58; Chittick, *Ibn Arabi: Heir to the Prophets*, pp. 18-20.

^{ix} Gospel of Mark 10:18.

^x Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, 1992.

^{xi} Campbell, *The Power of Myth*, 1991.

^{xii} Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, Section 341.

^{xiii} 'Arabi, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, 1980.

^{xiv} Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, p. 24.

^{xv}. Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, pp. 77-78.

^{xvi}. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, pp. 16-19.

^{xvii}. Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, p. 105.

^{xviii}. 'Arabi, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, pp. 111-118.

^{xix}. Quran 67:2.

^{xx}. Since both are possibilities of infinite, therefore, they will inevitably manifest.

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