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Does God Create Evil? A Study of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī's Exegesis of *Sūrat al-falaq*

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ABSTRACT

The present piece of research analyses Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī's exegesis of *Sūrat al-falaq* in his voluminous *tafsīr*, *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*. In his exegesis of *Sūrat al-falaq*, al-Rāzī draws on the insights of philosophical Sufism (*'irfān*), philosophy, and science in general, in addition to the transmitted (*naqlī*) sciences. The focus of al-Rāzī's exegesis in this chapter is the problem of evil. According to al-Rāzī, evil is found only in the sublunar world, that is, the world of generation and corruption. And this is so owing to the fact that the sublunar world contains bodily substances, in contrast to the world of spirit, in which only spirits (*arwāḥ*) dwell. However, as his exegesis segues into the specific verses of *Sūrat al-falaq*, it begins to take a more polemical turn against the Mu'tazilites and other theological opponents. Al-Rāzī's theodicy remains faithful in part to his Ash'arite predecessors and, although he attempts to deconstruct the Mu'tazilite position on this issue, he does not present an alternative doctrine in his *tafsīr*. Instead, his response (after refuting his opponents) betrays a combination of scriptural evidence and rational arguments that seek to valorize divine omnipotence.

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Ash'arite; *sharr*

1. Introduction

Recent decades have seen a surge in Rāzī studies from various quarters (Arnaldez 2002; Shihadeh 2006; Lagarde 2009; Jaffer 2015). Although these studies have explored various aspects of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī's (d. 1210)¹ thought, few, if any, have dealt with how he treats the problem of evil in the context of his great exegesis (*Al-tafsīr al-kabīr*), *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*.² Ayman Shihadeh (2006, 102–103, 160–169), for instance, discusses theodicy, or more properly al-Rāzī's objections to neo-platonic theodicy, in the context of the latter's philosophical pessimism as found in the treatise *Dhamm ladhdhāt al-dunyā*. The rather limited discussion of that study devoted to theodicy is mainly based on al-Rāzī's *Al-mulakhkhaṣ fī al-ḥikma wa-al-manṭiq* and *Sharḥ 'Uyūn al-ḥikma*, and his commentary on Avicenna's *Ishārāt*, although it contains some references to *Al-maṭālib al-'āliya* as well. Shihadeh's analysis concludes that, since al-Rāzī rejects Mu'tazilite ethical realism and asserts Ash'arite divine voluntarism instead, his theodicy does not require God's actions to be morally justified. Shihadeh's insightful analysis, however, does not engage in detail with the Mu'tazilite theodicy that arrests al-Rāzī's attention in the

Mafātīh. Nor does it present al-Rāzī's refutation of other theological sects, such as the dualists, or many other related issues that al-Rāzī broaches in his *tafsīr*. The present study thus unpacks al-Rāzī's stance on the problem of evil in the context of his *tafsīr*, in which he engages not only with the Mu'tazilites but also with various sects such as the dualists and other exegetes – all of which sheds new light on aspects of his theodicy not studied previously. In other words, this study is an investigation of al-Rāzī's exegesis of *Sūrat al-falaq* in general, and how he responds to other exegetes and his theological adversaries regarding the problem of evil in particular. For the purposes of focus and depth, I shall mainly investigate *Sūrat al-falaq* in the *Mafātīh*, and in particular its second verse. I shall, however, refer to other relevant works whenever it becomes necessary, depending on the context.

Sūrat al-falaq stands out in al-Rāzī's exegesis as the chapter in which he displays the integrative approach of blending various sciences (both the philosophical and the religious) into the matrix of *tafsīr*. Moreover, the apparent meaning of Q 113.2³ (*min sharri mā khalaqa*) immediately poses the problem that seems to compromise God's goodness and justice. On the surface, the verse suggests that the creation of evil is God's undertaking in the first place. Thus, it is self-contradictory, as some would argue, that God would command humans to seek refuge in Him from evils by reciting the *mu'awwidhatayn* (i.e. the two *sūras* of *al-Falaq* and *al-Nās*) if He Himself is the creator of these evils.⁴ Moreover, given that God has decreed everything pre-eternally, it would make little sense to seek refuge in Him from evil since whatever has been decreed is destined to happen anyway.⁵ These and other-related problems in the exegesis of *Sūrat al-falaq* constitute the topics for the present investigation.

Theodicy, or the problem of evil, has been a perennial concern for nearly every major theistic religion.⁶ Theologians of various religious traditions have felt the need to confront the issue of evil in a supposedly just world in order 'to justify the ways of God to men' (Milton 1962, 6). In a somewhat simplified manner, the problem of theodicy can be stated as follows:

Theologians generally affirm that God is Good, Just and All-Powerful. However, they also agree that there is 'evil' in the world. This leads to the following dilemmas with respect to God's essential attributes:

- (1) God wishes to eradicate evil because He is Good. So whence evil?
- (2) God wishes to remove evil but cannot do so. Does God lack power?
- (3) God can exterminate evil since He is All-Powerful, but will not do so. Is He a Good God?

In order to come to terms with these thorny questions, Muslim theologians have formulated diverse responses, and often over-emphasized certain 'attributes' (*ṣifāt*) of God at the expense of others. In his philosophical-cum-theological works, al-Rāzī rejects the neo-platonic, Avicennan account of theodicy that defines evil solely as 'privation' (Shihadeh 2006, 161).⁷ He also dismisses the neo-platonic idea of 'the existent as good and the non-existent as evil' by claiming that it lacks necessary demonstration.⁸ Al-Rāzī defines 'good' and 'evil' as subjective states associated with pleasure and pain. Thus, instead of a philosophical definition, he opts for a popular convention (*al-'urf al-'āmm al-mashhūr*), in which evil is understood as pain or suffering and what leads to it (see

Shihadeh 2006, 163). He also avers, *pace* Avicenna, that the world as a whole contains more evil than good. However, like Avicenna, he maintains that evil is specific to the sub-lunar world, since the world of command or spirit (*‘ālam al-amr*) is characterized by pure goodness (al-Rāzī 1980, vol. 32, 186). Although it appears that, in al-Rāzī’s theodicy, God is the originator of evil, he remains unclear as to ‘why’ God creates it.⁹

In the *Mafātīh*, al-Rāzī’s primary goal is to counter the Mu’tazilite rival view of theodicy, in addition to refuting the misgivings of the dualists (*thanawiyya*), heretics (*malāhida*) and Zoroastrians (*majūs*). The *mu’awwidhatayn* are said to have been revealed in order to dispel the magic spell that a certain man named Labīd b. Aṣam had cast on the Prophet Muhammad.¹⁰ In his *tafsīr*, al-Rāzī discusses all the traditional accounts related to the context of revelation (*asbāb al-nuzūl*) in detail. Thus, his exegesis of *Sūrat al-falaq* betrays a combination of both *‘aql* (intellect/reason) and *naql* (transmission/scripture).¹¹ On the methodological front, al-Rāzī is an unabashed advocate of allegorical interpretation (or simply, ‘interpretation’) or what is known as *ta’wīl*.¹² Indeed, much of his exegesis of *Sūrat al-falaq* is based on the principle of *ta’wīl*. The organization of this study is as follows: Section 2 lays out the structure of the *tafsīr Sūrat al-falaq*, while Section 3 briefly compares al-Rāzī’s exegesis of Q 113 with that of the other major exegetes so as to cast light on the diversity of approaches and interpretations. Section 4 investigates his approach to theodicy with the following question in mind: ‘How does al-Rāzī account for divine justice vis-à-vis the problem of suffering in the world?’, and finally, Section 5 concludes.

2. Structure of the *tafsīr of Sūrat al-falaq*

Al-Rāzī’s *Mafātīh al-ghayb* is one of the most systematic *tafsīrs* that have been composed in the Islamic intellectual tradition. His distinctive method involves approaching each verse in its entirety, and formulating a set of problems (*masā’il*) around them, through which he would then engage with other exegetes. In the *tafsīr* of *Sūrat al-falaq*, al-Rāzī first describes the ontological root of evil (al-Rāzī 1980, vol. 32, 186–187). In his view, the world of contingent beings divides into the world of command (*‘ālam al-amr*) and the world of creation (*‘ālam al-khalq*), in which the former is an abode of pure goodness (*khayrāt maḥḍa*) (186).¹³ As has been mentioned, al-Rāzī concurs with Avicenna that ‘evil’ is found only in the sublunar world, since it contains embodied entities (186). He then meditates on the characteristic features of different genera of creation that are hierarchically situated in the order of the physical world. He states:

He said first, ‘Say: I take refuge in the Lord of dawn.’ This is because the darkness of non-existence is without an end (*zulumāt al-‘adam ghayra mutanāhiya*), and the Real – Glorified is He – is the one who sets an end to those darknesses with the light of creation and origination of being. That is why He said, ‘Say: I take refuge in the Lord of dawn.’ Then He said, ‘From the evil which He hath created’ – the explanation of which is in the following – the world of contingent beings (*‘ālam al-mumkināt*) divides into the world of command (*‘ālam al-amr*) and the world of creation (*‘ālam al-khalq*) in accordance with His saying ‘Verily His is all creation and commandment.’ And [it is affirmed that] the world of command is pure goodness (*khayrāt maḥḍa*) free from evil. However, the world of creation is that of bodies (*ajsām*) and things attached to bodies (*jismāniyyāt*). And evil is found in it ... It is well-known that bodies are either made out of ether (*athariyya*) or one of the [four prime] elements (*‘unṣuriyya*). Bodies made of ether are good because they contain no mixing

or rift, as He said, ‘Thou [Muhammad] canst see no fault in the All-Merciful’s creation; then look again: Canst thou see any rifts?’ [Q 67.3]. As for the elemental entities, they are minerals, plants, and animals. As for minerals they are devoid of any mental faculties (*jamr al-quwwa al-nafsāniyya*) in which darkness prevails and light is completely evanescent ... As for the plants, they [possess] vegetal nutritive faculty (*al-quwwa al-ghādhīyya*) that grows in length, width, and height simultaneously ... As for animals, they have animal faculties such as the external and the internal senses (*al-ḥawāss al-zāhira wa-al-ḥawāss al-bāṭina*), alongside appetitive and irascible faculties, all of which prevent the human spirit (*al-rūh al-insāniyya*) from soaring [high] into the unseen world, and from being absorbed in the sacred [presence] of God’s majesty.¹⁴ (186)

After this summary passage, al-Rāzī proceeds to relate the discussion of *Sūrat al-falaq* to that of *Sūrat al-nās*. Here again he has recourse to *ta’wīl* just as he does in the above translated text. For instance, he mentions that it appears as though God names Himself in these two *sūras* according to the different levels of the human soul (al-Rāzī 1980, vol. 32, 186). Al-Rāzī then outlines the traditional accounts of the contexts of *Sūrat al-falaq* (see the following section), and claims that the Mu‘tazilites deny all of these reports (187–188). In the exegesis of this *sūra*, he approaches each verse systematically, delineating various transmitted reports (*akhbār*), while at the same time, broaching all the relevant theological issues that arise within the context.

3. *Sūrat al-falaq*: al-Rāzī and other exegetes

The purpose of this section is to bring other major exegetes from diverse schools of thought into conversation with al-Rāzī’s exegesis of *Sūrat al-falaq*, and to compare their approaches and interpretations with his in order to shed light on the context of his *tafsīr*. The significance of this exercise lies in that it will reveal how al-Rāzī, in contrast to most other major exegetes, was able to address the problems confronting the apparent meaning of Q 113.2. In his exegesis of *Sūrat al-falaq*, he engages with other exegetes (especially the Mu‘tazilites) and attempts to respond to their various interpretations. He also does not neglect to take into account *asbāb al-nuzūl* (occasions of revelation) of *Sūrat al-falaq* in the manner of the Hadith/history-based *tafsīrs* (as in al-Ṭabarī, for example). As stated above, al-Rāzī places much emphasis on the contentious exegesis of Q 113.2, so this section will not highlight al-Rāzī’s own exegesis of the second verse of the *sūra*, as this will be treated in the next section. We shall begin with his outline of the contextual background of this *sūra*:

The following points are mentioned concerning the revelation of this *sūra*: 1) it is reported that Gabriel appeared to him (i.e. the Prophet), and said, ‘*Ifrit* from the djinns is around you.’ Then he said, ‘When he approaches your bed say the *sūras* of “Say: I seek refuge in the lord.”’ 2) God revealed them [these two *sūras*] to him in order to dispel the magic-spell from the eyes. It is [reported] on the authority of Sa‘īd b. Musayyab that the Quraysh said: ‘Come, and we will starve and confine Muḥammad’, and they did so ... Then God revealed the *mu‘awwidhatayn*. 3) according to the exegetes, Labid b. A‘ṣam, the Jew, cast a spell on the Prophet using ‘eleven knots’ that he put at the bottom of a well called Dharwān, and the Messenger of God became ill, and the [spell] intensified in him for three nights until the *mu‘awwidhatayn* were revealed thereupon ... (al-Rāzī 1980, vol. 32, 187)

It can be seen from the above description that al-Rāzī presents several possible contexts for the revelation of *Sūrat al-falaq*. The episode that has been repeated widely in the *tafsīr*

tradition is the one in which a certain Jew called Labid b. Aʿṣam is said to have cast spell on the Prophet. All-Rāzī only outlines the story here (187), but it is noteworthy that this incident is recounted in *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* from a number of transmitters, each with some variation.¹⁵ Most exegetes focus in their exegesis of Q 113 on the version attributed to ʿĀʾisha.¹⁶ In what follows, I shall analyse how some major exegetes interpret Q 113.

3.1. Al-Ṭabarī¹⁷

Al-Ṭabarī does not address the Labid episode in any noticeable detail, but it is implicit in his exegesis. On the other hand, commenting on verse 2, he says that it means: ‘Seeking refuge in God, the lord of the day-break, from evil of everything that possesses evil because “everything other than God” is His creation [hence, contains evil]’ (al-Ṭabarī 1997, 719).¹⁸

3.2. Al-Zamakhsharī¹⁹

Al-Zamakhsharī implicitly discards the Labid episode, which is unsurprising given his Muʿtazilite commitment. According to al-Zamakhsharī (1998, 464), verse 2 of *Sūrat al-falaq* points to the ‘evil of His creation’ (*min sharri khalqīhi*), and their evil (*wa-sharruhum*), that is, the evil of the creatures. In keeping with the standard Muʿtazilite theodicy, he goes on to state that the evil mentioned in the verse refers to the deeds of human beings (*afʿāl al-mukallafīn*) when they kill or harm one another (464).²⁰ However, the evil mentioned in the verse may also refer to the actions of predatory animals and deadly insects that are not morally obligated (464–465). In his own *tafsīr*, al-Rāzī explicitly mentions the Muʿtazilite theodicy, and expresses his disagreements with it (see the next section).

3.3. Al-Maybudī²¹

Al-Maybudī recounts the Labid episode in detail, and refers to al-Bukhārī. However, commenting on the verse in question, he does not mention ‘evil’, nor does he pay special attention to it (Maybudī 1952–1960, vol. 10, 668–671). He focuses on the mystical significance of this *sūra* by stating that exoteric folks (Pers. *ahl-i zāhir*) will recite this *sūra* in order to ward off evils, but the chivalrous on the Path and the seekers of reality (Pers. *javānmar-dān-i ṭarīqat wa-ahl-i ḥaqīqat*) will seek submission (*taslīm*) and contentment (*riḍā*) through it. He urges the reader to accept whatever God ordains. Moreover, he suggests that one should not be too inquisitive, and accept God as *Wakīl* (disposer of affairs) instead and abide by the [injunctions] of the Shariʿa (671–672).

3.4. Ibn Kathīr²²

In Ibn Kathīr’s exegesis, the story of Labid b. Aʿṣam appears in full detail and is narrated from al-Bukhārī. As for the verse on evil, he only states the following: ‘[F]rom the evil of all created things. Thābit al-Bunānī and Ḥasan al-Baṣrī both said [concerning this verse], “Hell, Iblīs and his progeny from whom He created [evil]”’ (Ibn Kathīr 2006, 3556).²³

3.5. *Al-Ṭabāṭabāʾī*²⁴

Al-Ṭabāṭabāʾī, too, accepts the veracity of the event in which Labīd b. Aʿṣam is said to have cast a spell on the Prophet. He discusses this event in the Shīʿite context, and offers several Shīʿite traditions in order to validate it (Ṭabāṭabāʾī 1997, vol. 20, 456–457).²⁵ According to al-Ṭabāṭabāʾī, the ‘evil’ in the second verse refers to the evil of all creatures, including humans, djinns and animals. He offers an interesting perspective on this verse by stating that ‘*mā khalaqa*’ does not imply ‘everything in creation is evil’. In his view, although the apparent meaning of the expression implies non-delimitation (*iṭlāq*), it should not be taken to suggest a universal truth.

This brief excursion into the *tafsīr* of other major exegetes shows that most of them are in agreement with regard to the episode of Labīd b. Aʿṣam. However, what sets al-Rāzī’s *tafsīr* apart from that of the aforementioned exegetes is his systematic treatment of all the theologico-philosophical issues regarding the specific verses of *Sūrat al-falaq*, and also his response to rival theological schools when disagreement arises. The next section thus documents al-Rāzī’s treatment of theodicy in the context of his exegesis.

4. Al-Rāzī’s account of theodicy in the context of his *tafsīr* (*Mafāṭiḥ al-ghayb*)

Theodicy in Islamic thought arose in reaction to conceptions of God that emphasized divine omnipotence (Ormsby 1984, 16). The early formulations, associated especially with the Muʿtazilites, tended to downplay divine omnipotence in favour of divine justice or duty. The Muʿtazilite theodicy begins with the premise that it is impossible for God to perform a bad action or fail to meet an obligation (*taklīf*).²⁶ According to the Muʿtazilites, human actions are the result of autonomous will and power. If human actions are determined by God, it would be unjust of Him to either reward or punish His servants on the basis of their actions (Shihadeh 2014, 2).²⁷ This is so because, if God is the sole agent of every action, which includes both belief and unbelief, He would end up punishing the unbeliever for a sin that He Himself has implanted in him in the first place. Thus, God’s justice requires humans to have free choice and control over their actions. The Muʿtazilites also believe that the creation of the world is ultimately beneficial for humans, despite any suffering that may exist in it, since it gives them an opportunity to attain reward that far exceeds the suffering. They further argue that it is obligatory upon God to help and motivate humans to fulfil their religious duties or obligations. Muʿtazilite theodicy also affirms that human reason, independent of revelation, can know the reward deserved for good acts and the punishment deserved for bad acts.²⁸ Furthermore, the Muʿtazilites affirm that the moral value of an act is objective, and is within the reach of reason (Shihadeh 2014, 2–3). In other words, ethical terms such as ‘good’ or ‘bad’ refer to real and objective properties of actions.

The Ashʿarites, who reject ethical realism, affirm God’s unlimited omnipotence and will. In their view, God’s actions are not restricted by ethical considerations (Shihadeh 2014, 3). The Ashʿarites embrace the doctrine of divine voluntarism, which places God above the constraints of human reason. Unlike the Muʿtazilites, they reject belief in free will and assert that all things are determined by divine decree. As al-Ashʿarī (d. 935-6) says, ‘We hold that there is no good or evil on earth, except what God wills; and that

things are by the will of God' (al-Ash'arī 1940, 31). And since God wills what He wills without recourse to reason, it is not permissible to inquire into the 'why' of His actions.²⁹ For the Ash'arites, God may sometime choose to act 'unjustly', contrary to the Mu'tazilite belief (as shown above). For instance, He may show mercy to some sinners but may also cause suffering to humans. However, it should also be pointed out that, although the Ash'arites believe that God may decide to act arbitrarily, there are ample reasons to think that He will not do so, as He has given us His word concerning these matters (i.e. reward and punishment) (al-Ash'arī 1953, 99). In other words, God's own word acts as a constraint on His will. In addition, since the Ash'arites reject the ethical realism of the Mu'tazilites, they do not consider any act to be intrinsically good or bad, regardless of whether the agent is human or divine (Shihadeh 2014, 3). According to the Ash'arites, good and evil are solely determined by divine fiat, and human reason has little say over them (Ormsby 1984, 24). The Ash'arite theologian al-Bāqillānī (d. 1013) observes:

We emphatically deny that there is in the intellect, acting on its own, any way to know the evil of an act or its goodness, its legal prohibition or legal neutrality, or its obligatory nature. These judgements, in their totality, may not be posited for acts except through the divine law, and not through any determination of the intellect. (al-Bāqillānī 1957, 105; cited in Ormsby 1984, 25)

Al-Juwaynī (d. 1085) voices the same opinion in his *Irshād*, and argues that the goodness or badness of something falls solely within the confines of the law and the requirements imposed by tradition (al-Juwaynī 2000, 141). However, as has been pointed by Shihadeh (2014, 10), the classical Ash'arites couple their refutation of Mu'tazilite ethical realism with an alternative meta-ethical doctrine that ethical value terms such as good and bad have their referents in ordinary language. As we shall see in the next paragraph, such views of ethical value terms find their resonance in al-Rāzī as well.

In his *tafsīr* of *Sūrat al-falaq*, al-Rāzī faces the challenge of theodicy head-on. By using his method known as 'investigation and elimination' (*taqṣīm wa-sabr*),³⁰ he takes up the challenge posed by the Mu'tazilites, the dualists³¹ and the Zoroastrians³² regarding the problem of evil. What is perhaps unique and different about his treatment of theodicy in his *tafsīr*, in contradistinction to his more philosophical writings, is that here he sometimes has recourse to scripture in order to counter his opponents. However, as we shall see, he also sometimes uses pure dialectic to deconstruct rival views, which makes it difficult to distinguish whether one is reading a philosophical treatise or a *tafsīr* work. In what follows, I shall analyse key translated passages from al-Rāzī's *Mafātīḥ*, in which he first delineates the views of his opponents and then responds to them. According to al-Rāzī (1980, vol. 32, 193), the mention of 'evil' (*sharr*) in Q 113.2 may refer to a number of things, viz., malefic animals, deadly insects, harmful actions of both humans and djinns, fire of hell and so on. And he acknowledges that this is the view of most of the theologians (193; compare Rāzī's views with those of the other exegetes presented in Section 4). In his more philosophical works, such as *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt* and *Al-matālib al-āliya*, al-Rāzī provides other definitions of evil as well. In *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt* (2005, vol. 2, 551), he grounds the definition of 'evil' in commonly accepted convention or ordinary language (cf. Shihadeh 2006, 163). In the *Matālib*, after rejecting the philosophers' definition of evil as 'privation', he almost reiterates the same definition, but expands upon it slightly by adding more attributes such as

corruption, distress and affliction (al-Rāzī 1987, vol. 4, 149). According to al-Rāzī, it is self-evident that pain (*alam*) has an objective reference in the external world because people perceive painful states concretely. Moreover, he provides a typology of evil by enumerating three different ways in which evil can occur. In his view, things can be evil either by essence or by attributes or by acts (149). In al-Rāzī's scheme, 'evil by essence' is nothing but privation, while 'evil by attributes' refers to phenomena such as the absence of sight, hearing and the like. As for 'evil by acts', al-Rāzī defines it as the experience of pain and affliction. Overall, he asserts that the first two categories of evil are unreal or non-existent, whereas the third, which is evil as pain and suffering, is definitively real (149–150).

What one immediately recognizes in al-Rāzī's typology of evil is its Avicennan overtone. In his discussion of theodicy, Avicenna distinguishes between 'essential' and 'accidental' evil, both of which correspond to al-Rāzī's first two categories delineated above.³³ As for al-Rāzī's third category, it corresponds to Avicenna's 'relative' evil (*sharr nisbī*).³⁴ For Avicenna, the general cosmic order represents overall goodness rather than pain or evil. In keeping with the general neo-platonic framework, Avicenna denies absolute evil. In his view, evil is found only within the sublunar sphere and is always relative, and 'necessary' to sustain and perfect some things in the natural order (Avicenna 2005, 9.6, 339–347 [*Al-shifā* 9.6]). In contrast to al-Rāzī, Avicenna affirms that evil may be numerous but certainly not 'numerically great', as there is a difference between the two (347). Al-Rāzī seeks to overturn the Avicennan notion of evil by pointing out the overall gloomy, pessimistic picture of human life, although he grants that some forms of evil can indeed be categorized as privation or imperfection. However, he fails in the process to address Avicenna's multifaceted treatment of evil, in which the latter often stresses that 'evil is spoken of in many ways' (*al-sharr yuqālu 'alā wujūh*) (339 [*Al-shifā* 9.6]).³⁵ A complete discussion of Avicennan theodicy and its defence against the criticisms levelled by al-Rāzī would perhaps demand a separate study, and is unfortunately outside the scope of the present analysis.³⁶ So we must move on to focus on al-Rāzī's exegesis again.

After explaining the term 'sharr' in Q 113.2, al-Rāzī goes on to state that the intention behind '*mā khalaqa*' in the verse is in reference to ailments, maladies, drought and different types of suffering (al-Rāzī 1980, vol. 32, 193). Then, he adds that both Abū 'Alī Muḥammad al-Jubbā'ī (d. 915-16)³⁷ and 'Abd al-Jabbār (d. 1025)³⁸ reject this interpretation on the account of their view that 'God's actions cannot be regarded as evil':

The action of God cannot be described as evil. They say the following concerning this: 1) if it [God's action] was decreed as such it would imply that He that commands us to seek refuge in Him [from evil] and also commands us to protect ourselves from Him, and this involves a contradiction; 2) the actions of God are full of wisdom and rightness (*ḥikma wa-ṣawāb*), and it is not permissible to say that He is evil; and 3) if what God does is evil, it would attribute evilness to its agent [God], and God is transcendent, beyond such a thing (*wa-ta'āl allāh 'an dhālika*). (al-Rāzī 1980, vol. 32, 193–194)

In other words, according to these Mu'tazilites, God cannot be considered the 'origin' of evil, as this will lead to some of the problems of theodicy outlined in Section 1, that is, self-contradiction in divine decrees and compromise of God's goodness and justice. Yet, this is precisely the conundrum one has to deal with, if one were to follow the literal meaning of

Q 113.2 ('From the evil of what He has created'). The rationalist thinking of the Mu'tazilites recognizes that, if the 'literal' meaning of the verse were true, it would lead to a contradiction in that the same God Who enjoins humans to seek refuge in Him from evil creates it in the first place, which would not make much sense if God's aim is to protect humans from evil. Moreover, according to the Mu'tazilite scheme of things, the actions of God cannot be considered evil, as this would lead to 'evilness' being ascribed to the agent of those actions that bring about evil in the world. And such an understanding of divinity would radically undermine one of the basic tenets of Mu'tazilite theology, which upholds *'adl* (justice) as a fundamental attribute of God. Hence, they state that God's actions are full of wisdom and rightness, and it is not permissible to say that God creates evil. After stating the Mu'tazilite objections, al-Rāzī responds to each of them systematically:

Response: as to the first, have we not demonstrated his [the Prophet's] saying, 'I seek refuge in You from You'³⁹ (*a'ūdhubika minka*) to be not impossible? As to the second, when human beings are in pain (*lammā ta'allama*), they call it evil (*sharr*). However, 'evil' herein is mentioned in the context of the following: 'The recompense of an evil deed is an evil the like thereof, and 'And one who attacks you, attack him in like manner as he attacked you.' As to the third, the names of God are not mere technical expressions; rather they are determined according to the Prophetic tradition (*asmā' allāh tawqīfiyya lā iṣṭilāhiyya*). Moreover, God's attributes can include names such as ailments (*amrād*) and maladies (*asqām*), which are evil as He says: 'Unsettled when evil befalls him', and 'but when evil touches him then he abounds in prayer'. (al-Rāzī 1980, vol. 32, 194)

The Mu'tazilites seem to argue that it would make no sense for God to create evil through His actions and then ask us to seek refuge to Him from it, as this would be self-contradictory. Al-Rāzī responds to this by referring to the Prophetic tradition cited above. This Hadith, which is a 'supplication', states that the Prophet would seek refuge in God's approval from His displeasure, in His pardon from His punishment and also, seek refuge in Him from Him because he is incapable of praising Him as the latter should be praised. In other words, al-Rāzī argues that it is not self-contradictory for God to ask human beings to seek refuge in Him, while at the same time being Himself the originator of evil, because humans may, for example, be incapable of praising God as He should be praised, and so may incur His wrath (as in the Hadith quoted above). However, this is an argument by analogy, which falls short of the mark, since the Mu'tazilites affirm that God cannot command us to protect ourselves from evil, if He Himself is the creator of it in the first place. In any event, al-Rāzī also presents further arguments (see the following paragraphs) as to why and how evil may be ascribed to God's actions.

As for the second argument, al-Rāzī first explains evil through the everyday understanding of the experience of 'pain', which has been alluded above. In his view, evil is that which is subjectively perceived by a human being when she suffers pain. The point of mentioning evil in this way is to denude it of any 'intrinsic reference' (see also Shihadeh 2006, 163). That is to say, 'good' and 'bad' are perceiver- or subject-dependent realities. All accounts of evil are subjective (but they are nonetheless real), and hence depend on the 'states' of the person who is thinking about it through her experience at a given moment. In his *Al-arba'īn fi uṣūl al-dīn*, al-Rāzī treats the notions of 'good' and 'bad' at length in order to refute the Mu'tazilite ethical realism. He first states the self-evident truths that there are things that are by nature either agreeable or disagreeable, and

people love what is agreeable and hate what is painful. However, he objects to the Mu'tazilite notion of 'bad' that states that the bad is bad because it has the attribute of intrinsic badness. Thus something that is bad, such as lying, will be bad in all circumstances. Al-Rāzī counters this by arguing that there might be situations in which one should lie in order to save prophets from being killed. He then asks rhetorically whether or not 'lying' in such a circumstance would be considered bad, and he answers in the negative (al-Rāzī 1989, 346–348).

As recent studies by Shihadeh (2014) and Vasalou (2015) have shown, later Ash'arites beginning with al-Ghazālī (d. 1111) leaned towards a consequentialist theory of ethics, whose full-blown expression can be found in al-Rāzī's later works such *Al-maṭālib*, *Al-arba'īn* and *Al-ma'ālim*. In these works, al-Rāzī, like the Mu'tazilites, expounds the view that the intellect can judge acts as good or bad (Shihadeh 2014, 12). However, *contra* the Mu'tazilites, he rejects the idea that human understanding of good or evil can be equally applied to God's acts. For al-Rāzī, as Shihadeh explains, moral acts are agent-relative in the sense that what is 'good' for X can be 'bad' for Y, depending on one's motivations, expectations and so forth. In other words, an action's morality issues from the consequences intended by the agent, whether favourable or unfavourable. In al-Rāzī's view, the agent's calculations of expected benefits or harms determine her obedience to divine commands (Shihadeh 2014, 13).⁴⁰ However, al-Rāzī also remains in agreement with the earlier Ash'arites in the view that ethical subjectivism cannot be applied to God's acts because God is free from pain and pleasure. Also, God is not motivated to perform any act on account of benefit or harm. Vasalou also confirms Shihadeh's findings concerning Al-Rāzī's consequentialist ethics and the view that ethical judgments are grounded in a social contract or convention or in one's self-interest. One is motivated to act on the basis of justice and fairness because to do otherwise would be to expose one's own person and property to threat (Vasalou 2015, 124–129). However, it should be kept in mind that the ultimate purpose of such rationalist ethics is to convince the believer that it is in her best interest to obey religious injunctions (Shihadeh 2014).

As for the third objection, al-Rāzī again has recourse to scriptural sources, and claims that some names of God can be described as evil in the sense of states that cause pain. This is in reference to those names of God, such as *al-Muḍill* (one-who-leads astray), that have negative connotations. Al-Rāzī is saying that it is permissible for God to have names that indicate causes of pain, simply because divine names are exclusively determined by God.

After dealing with the Mu'tazilite objections, al-Rāzī turns his attention to refuting the views of the heretics⁴¹ who disparage the first two verses of Q 113. According to al-Rāzī, these heretics claim that it is pointless to try to protect ourselves from Him if the event/affair is pre-ordained by God, since at that time there will be no stopping it. They argue:

Is it [an event] going to occur through God's decree (*qadā'*) and pre-ordainment (*bi-qadar-ihī*),⁴² or not so? If it is, the first [question] is then how is it possible that He would command us to seek refuge in Him from Him, since whatever God decrees is destined to take place ...? And if it is not [going to occur] through His decree and pre-ordainment then this would be a slander (*qadh*) against the dominion of God and His angels. As for him who seeks protection: if it is known that the occurrence [of an event] cannot be avoided, then there is no benefit in seeking protection concerning this event, while if it is known that the event is not going to take place, then there is no need for seeking refuge ... If something is good and beneficial (*maṣlahā*), then why would human beings (*mukallaḥīn*) desire to avoid or prevent it? On

the other hand, if something is undesirable how is it [possible] that He would create and ordain it? (al-Rāzī 1980, vol. 32, 194)

The foregoing refers to the other problem of Q 113.2, which is the problem of pre-ordination. The heretics, as can be seen from the above, seem to suggest a species of ‘fatalism’ in the sense that whatever will be will be, and no human action can prevent it from happening. In their view, if something is beneficial then it is pointless to try to avoid it. On the other hand, it seems baffling to them that God would ordain and create anything that might be termed evil and undesirable. The logic of such an argument is very similar to that of the Mu‘tazilites, who, notwithstanding their differences with this group, also point to the justice of God, which would render creation of evil by God untenable. Al-Rāzī dismisses the above argument out of hand, and states that he has dealt with this and other similar reasoning in detail in his exegesis of Q 21.23.⁴³

As we turn our attention to the exegesis of Q 21.23, we see here that al-Rāzī amplifies his critique of theodicy by taking on the dualists, the Zoroastrians, and the polytheists as well. Al-Rāzī asserts there that the dualists, the Zoroastrians and the polytheists seek the cause of evil in God’s actions and some of them fancy that, since the world contains both evil and good, there must be two different ‘agents’ responsible for them:

[T]he dualists (*al-thanawiyya*) and the Zoroastrians (*al-majūs*) are the ones who ascribe a partner to God and say that the world is characterized by good and evil (*khayr wa-sharr*), pleasure and pain (*ladhdha wa-alam*), life and death, health and illness, poverty and abundance. [They continue by saying] that the agent of good must be good while that of evil must be evil, and since it is impossible for one and the same agent to be good and evil together, there must be two different agents, one of them being the agent for good and the other being the agent for evil. The gist of this doubt implies that, if the prudent governor of the world (*mudabbir al-‘alam*) is one, He would have to be the source of contradictory attributes such as life, health and abundance on the one hand and death, pain and poverty on the other. And this argument goes back to the seeking of the ‘why’ (*limmiyya*) in God’s actions – the Transcendent is He. In order to respond to the proponents of polytheism who seek the [cause] of suffering in [multiple agents], God, after mentioning the proofs of oneness, mentioned the crux of the issue to the doubters who raise doubts through [their belief] in polytheism. (al-Rāzī 1980, vol. 22, 155)

Al-Rāzī responds to all these arguments through a sophisticated dialectic that seeks to prove that, just as there must be an uncaused cause, its actions too must be uncaused and without any temporal origination. Against the dualists, he argues that, if we start from the premises that God is Good and Merciful and that He does not have the power to destroy the God of evil, then He is weak and incapable. However, a god, by definition, cannot be incapable. On the other hand, if the God of good does have the power to destroy the God of evil, but does not do so, then such a God is content with evil, which would imply that the God of good is no different from the God of evil. But this contradicts the initial premise; therefore there can only be a good God (al-Rāzī 1987, vol. 4, 399–400).

On the whole, al-Rāzī’s arguments suggest that God’s actions are devoid of any motives, which has a long-standing pedigree in Ash‘arite theology. As al-Ash‘arī himself argues, God acts freely, without the constraint of human reason:

The Proof that He is free to do whatever He does is that He is the Supreme Monarch, subject to no one, with no superior over Him who can permit, or command, or chide, or forbid, or prescribe what He shall do and fix bounds for Him. This being so, nothing can be evil on the

part of God. For a thing is evil on our part only because we transgress the limit and bound set for us and do what we have no right to do. But since the Creator is subject to no one and bound by no command, nothing can be evil on His part. (al-Ash'arī 1953, 99)

Moreover, as al-Rāzī states, God's actions are realized without any mediation:

The people of the Sunna (i.e., the Ash'arites) infer from the above-mentioned verse [Q 21.23] several points: [first], if an entity were an effect (*mu'allal*) through a cause (*'illa*) then that cause in turn would be an effect through another cause and this would lead to *regressus ad infinitum* (*tasalsul*).⁴⁴ Thus, in order to avoid there being an infinite regress, there must be an end to causal regress and the sequence must end in a thing that does not need a cause [for its existence]. The most likely things (*awlā al-ashyā'*) for that are God's essence and His attributes. Now, God's essence transcends the need for an efficient cause and His attributes are free from the need for an originator and something that determines [how these attributes are]. In a similar manner, His action too is transcendent, beyond any cause-effect nexus. [Second,] if His action were an effect through a cause then that cause itself would either be a necessary [cause] or a possible one. If it is a necessary [cause] then it would imply, through its necessity, being a necessitated agent. But this will lead to its essence being conditioned, and it would not then be a free agent (*fā'il bi-al-ikhtiyār*). And if it is a possible cause then this cause would be God's actions. And His action for this cause would require another cause, and this would lead to *regressus ad infinitum*, which is absurd. (al-Rāzī 1980, vol. 22, 155)

In the above, al-Rāzī presents several arguments to show that God's actions are beyond the cause-effect nexus. This, he argues, is the case when we see the analogy between God's actions and His Essence in that the latter is the cause of all things but itself uncaused. Since every contingent being requires a cause, and then that cause would require another cause (as it will be an effect with respect its own cause), the series must end at some point. Otherwise, we shall run into an infinite regress, which is inadmissible. Thus, the Divine Essence must be a self-caused reality that is also self-sufficient. Its self-sufficiency implies that Its actions too are self-referential, meaning they transcend the cause-effect nexus. Al-Rāzī continues his critique by arguing that God's actions are devoid of any motives:

[Fourth,] if the action is characterized by an objective (*gharad*), it would either be possible to realize that objective without having a mediator (*al-wāsiṭa*) or not possible to do so. If it is possible without that mediator then the mediation of the mediator would be futile. And if it is possible through an intermediary then it would imply that He is incapable of doing it. But incapability is absurd concerning God – transcendent is He. However, incapability, when applied to [humans], is not something impossible. For this reason, our actions are effected through aims/objectives, but all this is impossible with respect to God. [Fifth,] if His action is the effect of a final cause then this objective would refer back either to God or to the servant. The first is impossible because God is indifferent to benefit and loss. When it is rejected that His actions are not determined by an objective then this [objective] must refer to the servant. And there is no objective for the servant except that which is realized for pleasure or pain. And God – transcendent is He – is powerful over all that is realized without any intermediary. And if that is the case, it is impossible that He would act for the sake of something. (al-Rāzī 1980, vol. 22, 155–156)

The above passage sheds light on the substance of al-Rāzī's response to the problems posed by Q 113.2. Up to this point, he has mainly presented other viewpoints, and his partial response to them. However, the passage quoted above addresses a possible way out of the problems of theodicy in Q 113.2. Using the method of 'investigation and elimination', al-Rāzī begins by stating that if 'actions' are characterized by having an objective,

then they would materialize either through an intermediary or in the absence of such an intermediary. However, if actions require an intermediary, then it would be futile on the part of the agent to perform them herself since the intermediary can undertake them in the absence of the agent. On the other hand, if actions cannot be performed through an intermediary, then it would imply ‘incapability’ on the agent’s part, and incapability is meaningless when applied to God, since the latter is All-Powerful. Thus, the only way one can overcome this dilemma is by granting that God’s actions are not characterized any ‘objective’ (*gharaḍ*) in the first place. To wit, if God’s actions lack any motive or objective then the problem of the intermediary or incapability would not arise. Al-Rāzī explains this further by arguing that human action is characterized by objectives, whereas divine action is devoid of any such goals.⁴⁵ This is true, *a fortiori*, because God is indifferent to the questions of benefit or loss that are associated with human action. Thus, the issue of pre-ordainment pointed out by both the Mu‘tazilites and the heretics in the previous paragraphs is dissolved at one stroke. That is to say, God does not undertake to do something with a pre-determined purpose. Rather, He does what pleases Him as a Supreme Sovereign, as has been indicated by the Ash‘arī quotation. It is such an Ash‘arite view of divinity that al-Rāzī elaborates further, as analysed below.

Towards the end of this rebuttal, al-Rāzī takes on the Mu‘tazilites again and initiates a thorough-going *kalām* dialectic that seeks to undermine their standpoint on evil. To have a fair view of both sides, it would be helpful to cite first a Mu‘tazilite authority who also expatiates on the question of evil. The famous Mu‘tazilite theologian ‘Abd al-Jabbār, for instance, responds to the problem of theodicy in the following:

What is the proof that God does not do that which is ethically wrong (*la yaf‘alu al-qabih*)? ... Because He knows the immorality of all unethical acts (pl. *qaba’ih*) and that He is self-sufficient without them, and it is impossible for Him to do them. For one of us who knows the immorality of injustice and lying, if he knows that he is self-sufficient without them and has no need of them, it would be impossible for him to choose them, in so far as he knows of their immorality and his self-sufficiency without them. Therefore, if God is sufficient without need of any unethical thing it necessarily follows that He would not choose [the unethical], based on His knowledge of its immorality. Thus every immoral thing that happens in the world must be a human act, for God transcends doing [immoral acts]. Indeed, God has distanced Himself from that with His saying: ‘But Allah wills no injustice to His servants’ (Q. 40:31), and His saying: ‘Verily Allah will not deal unjustly with humankind in anything’ (Q. 10:44). (*Al-uṣūl al-khamsa*, in Martin, Woodward, and Atmaja 1997, 96 [translation slightly modified here]; cf. ‘Abd al-Jabbār 1998, 69ff; ‘Abd al-Jabbār 1992, 316ff.)

According to ‘Abd al-Jabbār, since God transcends committing immoral acts, all the evils found in the world must be a consequence of human undertaking. He also complements his argument by citing the Qur’anic verses that show that God does not act unjustly with respect to human affairs, and adds further:

If they [human acts] were done by God then what good would there be in His commanding those that are ethically good and prohibiting those that are ethically bad, and praising and rewarding obedience but blaming and punishing disobedience? In the same way, it would not be good for Him to command His acts in us, such as color, shape, health, and sickness, or to prohibit such, or lay blame for such. Moreover, if God were the agent of our acts then they would not have happened according to our purposes and motivations. And moreover, even a wise man cannot create his own abuse, or condemn and vilify himself; for how could it

be said that every abuse and vilification [addressed] to him is of his own doing? (*Al-uṣūl al-khamsa*, in Martin, Woodward, and Atmaja 1997, 97)

Several points can be discerned from the foregoing. First of all, ‘Abd al-Jabbār upholds ethical realism, which the classical Ash‘arites deny vehemently. For him, good and evil are objective realities. He denies that God is the cause of evil in the world, since, according to him, the latter transcends committing unethical acts. Also, in keeping with the standard Mu‘tazilite worldview, ‘Abd al-Jabbār affirms human ‘free will’, and attributes evil to immoral acts. The crux of his argument is that, if God is the agent of human acts, it would not make sense to create a moral paradigm through the Shari‘a, and enjoin human beings to perform the good and refrain from the evil.

Unsurprisingly, al-Rāzī rejects all of the above points. His arguments betray a mixture of rational and scriptural texture, and the point that al-Rāzī stresses time and again is that God is a voluntary agent who cannot be questioned for His actions, and that when He acts there is no ‘motive’ behind it (although he does concede that God’s commands serve the interest of humans). He writes:

It is not allowed to ask of God about His actions, ‘Why did you do this?’ (*lima fa‘alta hādihā al-fi‘l*). He is the cause of everything, while Himself being uncaused. Even though the Mu‘tazilites accept that it is not allowed to ask of God, ‘Why did you do this?’, they get around this on the basis of another principle, namely that God knows the ‘badness of the bad acts’ (*qubh al-qabā‘ih*) and is above such things. Thus it is impossible for Him to perform bad acts (*yaf‘ al-al-qabīh*). When we know this we know that every action of God is full of wisdom and rightness (*ḥikma wa-ṣawāb*). So it is not allowed to ask of God, ‘Why did you do this?’ (al-Rāzī 1980, vol. 22, 156)

According to al-Rāzī, God does what pleases him and, since His actions cannot be judged through our notions of good and bad, it would be pointless to assert that they are characterized by evilness. A careful analysis of the above passage also reveals that al-Rāzī attempts to turn the Mu‘tazilite argument on its head by suggesting that even the Mu‘tazilites concur that one cannot question God regarding His actions. However, what he fails to mention is that, for the Mu‘tazilites, God’s intrinsic nature prevents Him from undertaking any action that might be considered evil, whereas for the Ash‘arites it is the other way around. In other words, for the Mu‘tazilites it is due to divine justice that evil cannot be attributed to God, since He is by default good and just. On the contrary, what al-Rāzī seems to be offering is that one should accept divine free choice and voluntarism, and simply cannot ask God, ‘Why did you do this?’

After the above critique, al-Rāzī goes on to deconstruct the Mu‘tazilite theory of obligation (*taklīf*), which is related to the issue of human action.⁴⁶ According to the Mu‘tazilites, God imposes obligations on humans, subjecting them to a law. Therefore, human beings are called *mukallaḥūn*, as their life is governed by this law. The Mu‘tazilites argue that God imposes *taklīf* on human beings because they are given the possibility to attain the highest bliss, and if they follow the obligations imposed upon them, they would be able to fulfil the purpose of life for which they were created. The Ash‘arites, in contrast, refuse to answer this question, since they uphold divine liberty and say that no rule applies to God, Who can choose to do whatever He wishes, even if it goes against our notion of what is ‘just’.⁴⁷ In line with the general Ash‘arite framework, al-Rāzī sets out to oppose the notion of *taklīf* by arguing that the act of obligation is rendered

futile by the neutrality and the state of preponderance concerning actions that a person undertake:

The act of obligation (*al-taklīf*) is understood either with respect to the neutrality of the servant's motivations (*da'īya*) being inclined towards action or indifference toward it, or the state of preponderance with respect to one or the other. The first is absurd because the state of neutrality would prevent any preponderance [over one or the other], and in the second, the state of the 'impossibility of preponderance' (*ḥāl imtinā' al-tarjih*) would render obligation through preponderance an 'impossible obligation'. Therefore the second is also absurd because the state of preponderance (*rujḥān*) would require the preponderator (*rājih*) to tip the balance. (al-Rāzī 1980, vol. 22, 156–157)

To summarize: In his *tafsīr*, al-Rāzī does *not* present a positive doctrine after addressing all the problems posed by Q 113.2. The foregoing discussion shows that al-Rāzī was meticulous and thorough in identifying and analysing the problems of pre-ordainment, self-contradiction in divine decree, and compromise of divine justice and goodness arising from Q 113.2. Unlike other exegetes whose views on Q 113.2 have been analysed in this study, al-Rāzī devotes pages to addressing the theological problems arising from this verse. Ultimately, his interpretation rather hinges on the Ash'arite view of God, which upholds divine voluntarism concerning God's actions (cf. Shihadeh 2006, 167–168). This view prevents humans from judging God's actions as either good or evil, since such notions are entirely subject-dependent in nature. The implication of al-Rāzī's position on God and evil suggests that, even though some actions of God may appear to be 'evil' in our eyes, we have no right to question or judge them.

Thus, in his exegesis of Q 21.23, he points to a principle that should be applied when considering the God–servant relationship. On this principle, it cannot be asked of God, 'Why did you do this?' (*lima fa'alta dhālika*), whereas in the case of the servant it is permissible to ask such a question, as the verse indicates. He adduces proof for this by citing a number of qur'anic verses such as 'By you Lord, We shall certainly call all of them to account' (Q 15.92; trans. Pickthall, modified) and 'But stop them, indeed they are to be questioned' (Q 37.24; trans. Pickthall, modified). Moreover, in al-Rāzī's view, the servant does not have the power to ask God the 'why' of His actions, since, if God wishes to do anything, He will do it anyway. Also, the God–servant relationship is unequally polarized in that God is the King while the rest of the creation is under His dominion (al-Rāzī 1980, vol. 22, 156). Thus, the King cannot be questioned for His actions by His subjects. In short, there is no basis for ethical realism concerning God, as the Mu'tazilites maintain.

5. Conclusion

The *Mafātīḥ* is a sophisticated *tour de force* of a range of Islamic learning. As previous scholarship has also noted, al-Rāzī shows in it the assimilation of various sciences (Jaffer 2015, 87, 94). Nowhere does this become more manifest than in the introduction to *Sūrat al-falaq*, in which al-Rāzī draws on the insights of philosophical Sufism (*irfān*), philosophy, and science in general (al-Rāzī 1980, vol. 22, 186). In line with the Avicennan view, al-Rāzī asserts that evil is found only in the sublunar world. And this is so because the world of generation and corruption contains bodily substances, in contrast to the world of spirit in which only spirits (*arwāḥ*) dwell. As his exegesis moves

through the individual verses of the *sūra*, it begins to take a more polemical turn. Unlike most other exegetes studied in this essay, al-Rāzī does not shy away from engaging in cantankerous theological disputes with the Muʿtazilites and others, even though this occurs in the context of *tafsīr*. His methodology allows him to demonstrate an encyclopaedic scope of knowledge and it does not downplay the role of ‘transmitted science’ (*naql*), either. For this reason, he takes care to devote long sections to the contexts of revelation (*asbāb al-nuzūl*), as has been observed in the course of our analysis.

As for the issue of theodicy, al-Rāzī’s response remains faithful in part to his Ashʿarite commitment. It is noteworthy that his theodicy is informed by his consequentialist ethics and a commitment to ethical rationalism (not ethical realism). This marks a shift away from classical Ashʿarism, which however requires further research. Although he attempts to deconstruct the Muʿtazilite position on this issue, he does not present a full-fledged alternative doctrine in his *tafsīr*. Instead his response (after refuting his opponents) betrays a combination of scriptural evidence and dialectical arguments that seek to valorize divine omnipotence to the exclusion of many other factors. That is to say, God is All-Powerful, and His actions cannot be judged by human reason. However, even though God’s actions or commands lack any motives, they nonetheless serve human welfare. Such views are highly significant and bear considerable implications for the larger intellectual history of the Islamic tradition because, after al-Ghazālī, al-Rāzī is perhaps the most important Ashʿarite theologian and he exerted great influence on most subsequent theologians and philosophers (see, for example, Shihadeh 2005).

Unsurprisingly, not everyone will find Ashʿarite voluntarism or its emphasis on divine will particularly palatable. According to Averroes (Najjar 2001, 115–120), such reasoning might be detrimental to the foundation of religious creed itself. This study was not meant to be a critique of al-Rāzī’s theodicy, but if a critical stance is warranted, mention might be made towards the end that, in promoting their notion of theodicy, the classical or latter Ashʿarites neglect to consider the aspect of God which is said to be meta-personal, beyond all conceptual framing and conditioning, and which transcends the theological conception of ‘personal divinity’.⁴⁸ Viewed from such a perspective, the entire problem of theodicy will take a very different turn.

Notes

1. Some classical sources for al-Rāzī’s biography are: Ibn al-Qiftī (1903, 291–293), Ibn Khallikān (1948, 248–252) and al-Dhahabī (1997, 211–213). As for contemporary sources, see Zarkan (1963, 8–55), Street (1997) and Griffel (2007).
2. Although both Jaffer (2015) and Lagarde (2009) deal with aspects of al-Rāzī’s *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*, these studies do not touch upon the problem of evil. However, Shihadeh (2006, 161–169) has studied al-Rāzī’s criticism of neo-platonic theodicy in the context of the latter’s theological and philosophical works. For the structure chronology of the *Mafātīḥ*, see Gramlich (1979) and Jomier (1977).
3. ‘From the evil of (that) which He created’ (trans. Pickthall).
4. For a detailed discussion on this, see Section 4.
5. According to al-Rāzī, this is the argument of the heretics (identity unknown), whom he refutes. See al-Rāzī (1980, vol. 32, 194).
6. The term ‘theodicy’ was originally coined by G. W. Leibniz (d. 1716) in his *Essais de theodicée* (1952; originally published in 1710). It is derived from the Greek ‘*theos*’ (God) and ‘*dike*’ (justice), and is used in theology to account for God’s goodness and justice vis-a-vis the

- problem of suffering (evil) in the world. For an overview of theodicy in various traditions, see, for example, Ormsby (1984, 3–16), Hoover (2007), Leibniz (1952, 77ff.), Hick (1966, 5ff.), Billings (1952–1959), Pike (1964), Ricoeur (1969) and Herman (1976). For a comparative study of Christian and Islamic theodicy, see Jackson (2009, 3–26).
7. Al-Rāzī's conception and typology of evil are actually more complex than this, see Section 4. Shihadeh analyses and often compares al-Rāzī's theodicy vis-à-vis that of Avicenna, which is one of the reasons why the present author does not refer to Avicenna as much, although Section 4 contains some discussions of Avicennan theodicy that are not found in Shihadeh (2006). Also, in al-Rāzī's *tafsīr*, he mainly aims at the Mu'tazilites and other exegetes, and not at Avicenna, so this article focuses more on the Mu'tazilite theodicy. On neo-platonic theodicy, see Plotinus (1966–1968, 1.8.3–4, 13; 2.4). For an Avicennan theodicy, see Inati (2000, 67–79), Steel (1999) and Rashed (2000).
 8. Al-Rāzī, *Al-mulakhkhaṣ fī al-ḥikma wa-al-mantiq*, Ms. Hunt 329, Bodleian Library, Oxford, fol. 89a; cited in Shihadeh (2006, 162).
 9. See Section 4.
 10. For a fuller treatment of this story, see Section 3 of the present article. See also Toorawa (2002).
 11. On *ʿaql* and *naql*, see Sections 3 and 4.
 12. On *taʿwīl*, see *The Oxford Dictionary of Islam*, available at http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/opr/t125/e2358?_hi=0&_pos=7998 (accessed May 10, 2016).
 13. On *ʿālam al-amr* and *ʿālam al-khalq*, see Wensinck (1933, 199ff.). Analysing al-Ghazālī's views on the worlds of *jabarūt*, *malākūt*, and *mulk*, Wensinck suggests that the world of command corresponds to the world of spirits or *malakūt*, while the world of creation corresponds to the material world. For a more recent study on some of these terms, see Chittick (1989, 282, 386).
 14. All translations are mine unless otherwise indicated.
 15. *The Book of Medicine*, *bāb* 49–50, no. 5765–66 (al-Bukhārī 1997, 364–366).
 16. It is narrated on the authority of ʿĀ'isha:

O ʿĀ'isha! Do you know that Allah has answered me concerning what I asked Him? Two men came to me and one of them sat near my head while the other sat near my feet. The one near my head asked the other, 'What is wrong with this man?' The other replied, 'He is under a spell.' The first one asked, 'Who cast a spell on him?' The other replied, 'Labīd b. al-Aṣam, a man from Banī Zurayq, who was a confederate of the Jews and a hypocrite.' The first man asked, 'With what?' The other replied, 'A comb and hair from it.' The first man then asked, 'Where (is that)?' The other replied, 'In the dried bark of a male date palm under a rock in a well called Dharwān.' So the Prophet went to that well and took out those things and said, 'That was the well which was shown to me. It was as if its water had henna soaked in it and its palm trees were like the heads of devils.' The Prophet then added, 'Then that thing was removed.' I said (to the Prophet), 'Will you not inform this [incident] to others?' He said, 'God has cured me and I hate to incite evil among people' (al-Bukhārī 1997, 364, trans. Muḥammad Muḥsin Khān, significantly modified).

17. Abū Jaʿfar Muḥammad b. Jarīr b. Yazīd (d. 923), see Bosworth (2015).
18. Aḥmad b. Muḥammad b. Ibrāhīm Abū Ishāq al-Nisābūrī (d. 1035). See also al-Thaʿlabī whose *tafsīr* of Q 113 resembles that of al-Ṭabarī. On al-Thaʿlabī, see the excellent study by Saleh (2004, 25–54). As for his *tafsīr*, see al-Thaʿlabī, *al-Kashf wa-l-bayān ʿan tafsīr al-Qurʾān*. Accessed May 11, 2015. <http://www.alfasir.com/Tafasir.asp?tMadhNo=2&tTafsirNo=75&tSoraNo=113&tAyahNo=1&tDisplay=yes&UserProfile=0&LanguageId=1>.
19. Abū al-Qāsim Maḥmūd b. ʿUmar (d. 1144).
20. On *mukallaḥīn*, see the next section.
21. Rashīd al-Dīn Abū al-Faḍl Aḥmad b. Muḥammad (fl. 1126), Sufi exegete and author of a number of treatises. On his life and works, see Keeler (2006, 12–22).
22. ʿImād al-Dīn Ismāʿīl b. ʿUmar (d. 1373), famous Sunni exegete; see Laoust (2015).

23. Cf. also Muḥammad b. ‘Alī Shawkānī (d. 1834–39), a notable Sunni exegete: Shawkānī (1964–65, vol. 5, 455).
24. Sayyid Muḥammad Ḥusayn (d. 1981), Shi‘a exegete and philosopher. For notes on his life and works, see Algar (2006).
25. It is striking that Ṭabāṭabā‘ī’s account disagrees with that of Amīn al-Dīn Abū ‘Alī al-Faḍl b. al-Ḥasan Tabrisī (d. 1154). Tabrisī (2006, vol. 10, 378) shows a strong Mu‘tazilite influence in his exegesis of *Sūrat al-falaq*. He recounts the Labid episode and then dismisses it completely. Also, it is noteworthy that clear traces of al-Zamakhsharī’s influence can be found in his exegesis of Q 113.
26. Al-Rāzī and the Ash‘arites reject the Mu‘tazilite notion of *taklīf*, and argue that God is not bound by any such obligations. For al-Rāzī’s arguments against the Mu‘tazilites, see Shihadeh (2006, 102–103). For the Mu‘tazilite notion of *taklīf*, see Vasalou (2008, 32, 48).
27. The Ash‘arites believe humans acquire their ‘acts’, while God creates them – a theory known as *kasb*. It is not entirely clear whether al-Rāzī subscribes to the early or later Ash‘arite view of this. For his detailed discussion of *kasb*, see al-Rāzī (1989, 320ff.), where he enumerates all the different views on *kasb*. See also Shihadeh (2006) and Gimaret (1980).
28. For a treatment of Mu‘tazilite theodicy, see Vasalou (2008, 72–73, 83–84, 110–111).
29. For instance, al-Shahrastānī (1934, 405 [Arabic], 129 [English trans.]) says: ‘The truth is that the question why cannot be applied to the Creator’s substance or qualities or doings, so that no answer need be found ... “He cannot be asked about what He does, but they will be asked,” Q. 2:23.’ Al-Rāzī also expresses similar views, which are analysed in Section 4.
30. For more information on this method, see Jaffer (2015, 91).
31. On the identity of the dualists, see al-Shahrastānī (1992, vol. 2, 257–260).
32. On the identity of the Zoroastrians, see al-Shahrastānī (1992, vol. 2, 257–258).
33. On ‘essential’ versus ‘accidental’ evil in Avicenna, see Shihadeh (2006, 161).
34. On relative evil in Avicenna, see Bihishtī (2007, 337–360).
35. For instance, speaking of evil Avicenna, *inter alia*, states that it also refers to the principles of blameworthy acts in ethics (Avicenna, 2005, 343 [*Al-shifā* 9.6]).
36. Also, it is not the case that Avicenna or many other philosophers deny God as ‘*fā’il bi-al-mukhtār*’. Rather they assert ‘*fā’il bi-al-‘ināya*’ or ‘*fā’il bi-al-tajallī*’ in relation to God’s agency. These different types of ‘agency’ correspond to different types of ‘action’ (*fīl*) that are discussed by the philosophers; see Bihishtī (2007, 345–360) and Sabzawārī (1969, 158).
37. Abū ‘Alī Muḥammad b. ‘Abd al-Wahhāb, one of the most celebrated of the Mu‘tazilites who was the teacher of Abū al-Ḥasan al-Ash‘arī. For more information, see al-Shahrastānī (1992, vol. 1, 38ff.).
38. On ‘Abd al-Jabbār’s life and ethical theories, including theodicy, see Hourani (1971, 3–16, 48–69, 97–102) and Hourani (1985, 98–108). On ‘Abd al-Jabbār’s own account of theodicy, see ‘Abd al-Jabbār (1961–1974, vol. 6, 18–36, 48–52, 57–69, 77–80, 102–114).
39. al-Tirmizī (2007, vol. 6, 271) (‘The Book of Supplications’, *bāb* of the supplication of *al-Witr*, no. 3566; Abu Khalīl’s translation is modified here). The Hadith is as follows:

O God, I seek refuge in Your pleasure from Your anger, and I seek refuge in Your pardon from Your punishment, and ‘I seek refuge in You from You.’ I am not capable of praising You as You have praised Yourself.
40. On divine command theory in Ash‘arism and Mu‘tazilism, see Al-Attar (2010).
41. Al-Rāzī does not elaborate on their identity.
42. For al-Rāzī’s views on *qaḍā’* and *qadar* in the context of his exegesis of Q 54.49, see Hamza, Rizvi, and Mayer (2008, 469, 473–476). Al-Rāzī affirms that *qaḍā’* pertains to the divine knowledge while *qadar* is in the divine will. Thus for him creative activity is by God’s decree with His will, such that ‘God creates as He decrees’.
43. The verse says: *lā yus‘alu ‘ammā yafalu wa-hum yus‘alūna* (He will not be questioned as to that which He doeth, but they will be questioned; trans. Pickthall).
44. On the meaning of *tasalsul* in al-Rāzī’s philosophical theology, see Dagħīm (2001, 164–165).

45. On al-Rāzī's detailed treatment of human action, see al-Rāzī (1987, vol. 3 and vol. 9, 19ff.). And on the motivation of human action, see al-Rāzī (1987, vol. 3, 21ff.).
46. On *taklif*, see 'Abd al-Jabbār (1961–1974, vol. 11, 58ff.). For a comprehensive treatment of the concept, see Ibn Mattawayh (1986, vol. 3, 176–196). For an Ash'arite take on this, see al-Juwaynī (1950, 226ff.). Al-Rāzī also devotes pages to the concept of *taklif* in his *Al-arba'in* (1986, 327ff.).
47. On Ash'arite voluntarism, see Fakhry (1991, 46–60).
48. Such discussions of the meta-personal aspect of the divinity can be found in philosophical Sufism (*irfān*) and later Islamic philosophy; see for example al-Qayṣarī (1998, 13ff.). But this theme should constitute a project for future research.

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