6 Hume on Trial

Can Evil and Suffering Be Justified?

Muhammad U. Faruque

I

In the face of countless atheist attacks on the existence of God through the problem of evil, it has become almost a *façon de parler* for contemporary theist philosophers to first concede that the world is full of suffering and then offer various apologies in order to show how the concept of God can nonetheless be defended. As Meghan Sullivan and Paul Blaschko point out, we can think of these theist philosophers almost like a team of defense attorneys, offering alternative narratives and defenses, challenging the way in which Hume, Voltaire, and their numerous contemporary disciples use evil and suffering as an indictment of God's existence or goodness.[1] In fact, the situation can be best imagined as the following courtroom scenario:

> In his opening remarks, the atheist stands up and points to the sheer amount and degree of suffering in the world. He reminds the jury of particular instances of horrendous suffering, telling us stories so awful that we're tempted to turn away. "Now imagine God witnessing such suffering," he tells us. "If he exists, he's right there. He's perfect. He's all-powerful. He could stop this suffering at any moment. But he doesn't." The courtroom is silent. "The only explanation," the atheist concludes, "is that the God you've been led to believe in does not and cannot exist."[2]

The purpose of this article is not to offer another apology *à la* a defense attorney on behalf of those who see the trace of transcendence in nature, since the problem of evil is a doubly difficult problem for atheists if naturalism happens to be true (more on this later). Nevertheless, with the pandemic of COVID-19 unleashing its deadly consequences, which has already claimed over 15 million casualties all over the globe, the question of evil and suffering does make one wonder about its underlying purpose in human life. At the same time, it is also true that in recent years numerous people, especially in the West, have turned away from religion

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1 Meghan Sullivan and Paul Blaschko, *The Good Life Method* (New York: Penguin Press, 2022), 203.
2 Sullivan and Blaschko, *Good Life Method*, 204.

as a result of what they see as pointless suffering all across life. This supposition of "pointless suffering"[3]—framed more distinctly as the "evidential problem of evil"—can be traced back to the influential writings of David Hume in the Enlightenment period, which find their modern, stronger formulations in such philosophers as William Rowe and Paul Draper.[4] The purpose of this article is, therefore, to engage and challenge this Humean tradition that on the surface seems to pose a serious dilemma for those who do not accept naturalistic explanations. In essence, I will argue that the Humean tradition misunderstands the meaning of suffering by assuming that the goal of creation should be a custom-made paradise populated by weak, hedonistic humans seeking to maximize their pleasure. Instead, this paper will argue that the telos of creation is the human being's spiritual development and ultimate perfection for which suffering in life can be a means to actualize one's latent spiritual and ethical flourishing. But let us proceed step by step.

II

The atheist, no doubt, would begin by pointing to the cases of what Marilyn Adams calls "horrendous evils," i.e., "evils the participation in which (that is, the doing or suffering of which) constitutes prima facie reason to doubt whether the participant's life could (given their inclusion in it) be a great good to him/her on the whole."[5] As indicated earlier, the atheist attempts to generate psychological discomfort in our mind by recounting stories of horrendous suffering in the world such as the Holocaust of 1939–1945 or the Boxing Day Tsunami of 2004 or horrific instances of child rape, so that we would be motivated to turn away from any meaningful explanation. For example, Rowe brings to attention the two well-known cases of horrendous evil (a horrendous evil may be either a moral evil or a natural evil):[6]

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3 Whether it is "pointless" or not depends, of course, on a given perspective.
4 The evidential problem of evil—as opposed to the more ambitious logical problem of evil—explains to what extent certain instances, kinds, quantities, or distributions of evil constitute evidence against the existence of God. The logical problem of evil simply discounts the existence of God by arguing that evil is incompatible with a good, all-powerful God. See J. L. Mackie, "Evil and Omnipotence," *Mind* 64 (1955): 200–212; Alvin Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974); Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977); William Rowe, "The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 16 (1979): 335–431; William Rowe, "Evil and Theodicy," *Philosophical Topics* 16 (1988): 119–132; Paul Draper, "Pain and Pleasure: An Evidential Problem for Theists," *Nous* 23 (1989): 331–350. The origin of the "logical problem of evil" goes back to Pierre Bayle. Leibniz wrote his *Essais de Theodicée* (1710) in response to Pierre Bayle's treatment of the problem of evil in his *Dictionnaire historique et critique*. See Pierre Bayle, *Bayle Corpus—Oeuvres complètes*, ed. Antony McKenna and Gianluca Mori (Paris: Classiques Garnier Numérique, 2012); Leibniz, *Essais de théodicée: Sur la bonté de Dieu, la liberté de l'homme et l'origine du mal* (Chicago: ARTFL Project, 1996).
5 Marilyn Adams, *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1999), 26.
6 See Rowe, "Evil and Theodicy," 119.

E1:

In some distant forest lightning strikes a dead tree, resulting in a forest fire. In the fire a fawn is trapped, horribly burned, and lies in terrible agony for several days before death relieves its suffering.[7]

E2:

This is an actual case reported in the *Detroit Free Press* on January 3, 1986. The case involves a five-year-old girl in Flint, Michigan, who was severely beaten, raped, and then strangled to death early on New Year's Day in 1986.[8]

The event runs as follows: "the girl's mother was living with her boyfriend, another man who was unemployed, her two children, and her nine-month-old infant, fathered by the boyfriend. On New Year's Eve all three adults were drinking at a bar near the woman's home. The boyfriend had been taking drugs and drinking heavily. He was asked to leave the bar at 8:00 p.m. After several reappearances he finally stayed away for good at about 9:30 p.m. The woman and the unemployed man remained at the bar until 2:00 a.m., at which time the woman went home and the man to a party at a neighbor's home. Perhaps out of jealousy, the boyfriend attacked the woman when she walked into the house. Her brother was there and broke up the fight by hitting the boyfriend, who was passed out and slumped over a table when the brother left. Later the boyfriend attacked the woman again, and this time she knocked him unconscious. After checking on the children, she went to bed. Later, the woman's five-year-old girl went downstairs to go to the bathroom. The unemployed man returned from the party at 3:45 a.m. and found the five-year-old dead. She had been raped, severely beaten over most of her body, and strangled to death by the boyfriend."[9]

The latter part of this paper will be devoted to discussing various assumptions underlying the aforementioned cases, but the first thing that comes to mind about these cases is the question of innocent or pointless suffering. In fact, Rowe goes on to claim that no good we can think of justifies God in permitting E1 and E2, which can be viewed as instances of horrendous evil occurring daily in our world. Whether one can agree with this or not (including framing the question in this way), the roots and form of such inductive arguments go back to Hume, who is the main target of my investigation. But it should be briefly noted that such cases of *apparently* pointless evil or suffering are also found in religious scriptures. For instance, the Q 18:65–82 mentions the story of Moses meeting a stranger (often

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7 E1 is a hypothetical event, which Rowe takes to be a familiar sort of tragedy in nature.

8 Reported in Bruce Russell, "The Persistent Problem of Evil," *Faith and Philosophy* 6 (1989): 121–139.

9 Rowe "Evil and Theodicy," 120. Following Rowe (1988: 120), the case of the animal will be referred to as "E1," and the case of the little child as "E2."

identified as Khiḍr, who is a possessor of special knowledge) who baffles him by killing a boy and sinking a boat. The Qur'an graphically describes Moses' disgust at such acts: "You have certainly done a horrible thing" (Q 18:74).[10] In any case, let us return to Hume who, in his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, spells out four circumstances (or complaints) which determine all contexts for evil and suffering that we encounter in this world. As mentioned earlier, Hume's arguments wielded a great influence on contemporary philosophers, so it is worth quoting him at length before returning to E1 and E2:

> The *first* circumstance, which introduces evil, is that contrivance or economy of the animal creation, by which pains, as well as pleasures, are employed to excite all creatures to action, and make them vigilant in the great work of self-preservation. Now pleasure alone, in its various degrees, seems to human understanding sufficient for this purpose. All animals might be constantly in a state of enjoyment; but when urged by any of the necessities of nature, such as thirst, hunger, weariness; instead of pain, they might feel a diminution of pleasure, by which they might be prompted to seek that object, which is necessary to their subsistence. Men pursue pleasure as eagerly as they avoid pain; at least, might have been so constituted. It seems, therefore, plainly possible to carry on the business of life without any pain. Why then is any animal ever rendered susceptible of such a sensation?[11]

As we shall soon see, all these circumstances that Hume enumerates are interrelated. The first circumstance expresses the wish that if only living beings were incapable of pain, life would have been much more comfortable. In particular, if only animals were moved to action by a lessening of pleasure rather than by being driven through a feeling or a sensation of pain in order to maintain their basic needs, such as thirst, hunger, weariness, etc.! The hedonic tone in these desires is manifestly clear, but Hume does not seem to understand that both pain and pleasure are relative. In other words, a given unpleasant experience (e.g., hunger) may seem less unpleasant once we become accustomed to it, e.g., those who fast regularly or fast for a prolonged period as they do during the month of Ramadan. But Hume does note that this particular desire to eliminate pain is connected to the second circumstance, which has to do with the general laws of nature:

> But a capacity of pain would not alone produce pain, were it not for the *second* circumstance, *viz.*, the conducting of the world by general laws; and this seems no wise necessary to a very perfect being. It is true; if everything were conducted by particular volitions, the course of nature would be perpetually

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10 All translations from the Quran are taken, with modifications, from Muhammad Pickthall, *The Meaning of the Glorious Qur'an* (Chicago: Kazi, 1996).

11 David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, ed. D. Coleman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), XI, 81.

broken, and no man could employ his reason in the conduct of life. But might not other particular volitions remedy this inconvenience? In short, might not the deity exterminate all ill, wherever it were to be found; and produce all good, without any preparation or long progress of causes and effects? . . . A being, therefore, who knows the secret springs of the universe, might easily, by particular volitions, turn all these accidents to the good of mankind, and render the whole world happy, without discovering himself in any operation. . . . A few such events as these, regularly and wisely conducted, would change the face of the world; and yet would no more seem to disturb the course of nature or confound human conduct, than the present economy of things, where the causes are secret, and variable, and compounded.[12]

Again, the appeal to the deity here is that if only the management of the world had been administered on the basis of a voluntaristic will to avoid all pain and suffering! Hume does grant that you cannot completely run the world haphazardly, for that would lead to a total chaos. So he respects the necessity of putting the laws of nature in place. But he wonders why it is that an omnipotent deity, who knows all the secrets of the universe—including what is in everyone's mind, cannot make use of His "particular volitions" to neutralize all would-be evils. For instance, He could have secretly the changed the minds of 9/11 hijackers so that they would be prompted not to demolish the World Trade Center at the last moment. And a great evil could have been avoided. Similarly, He could have also influenced the decision of the gunman who massacred innocent worshippers at the mosque in Christchurch, New Zealand. The point being that one can think of numerous such cases where all that was asked of God was a little interference here and there so that the world would have been a slightly better place.

It is interesting that Hume's appeal to such voluntaristic exercise of the Divine Will has a parallel in the Ashʿarite-Muʿtazilite debate on the question of evil in relation to divine justice. The Muʿtazilite theodicy begins with the premise that it is impossible for God to perform a bad act or to omit an obligation (*taklīf*).[13] 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 creatures based on their actions.[14] This is so because if God is the sole agent of every action, which includes both good and bad, He would end

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12 Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, XI, 81–82.

13 The Ashʿarites reject the Muʿtazilite notion of *taklīf* and argue that God is not bound by any such obligations. For the Muʿtazilite notion of *taklīf*, see Sophia Vasalou, *Moral Agents and Their Deserts: The Character of Muʿtazilite Ethics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 32, 48.

14 The Ashʿarites believe humans acquire their "acts," while God creates them—a theory known as "*kasb*." For more information, see Daniel Gimaret, *Théories de l'acte humain en théologie musulmane* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1980); Ayman Shihadeh, *The Teleological Ethics of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī* (Leiden: Brill, 2006); Muhammad Faruque, "Does God Create Evil? A Study of Fakhr al-Dīn Rāzī's Exegesis of *Sūrat al-falaq*," *Islam and Christian—Muslim Relations* 28, no. 3 (2017): 271–291.

up punishing the bad person for a crime that He Himself has implanted in them in the first place. Thus, God's justice requires humans to have free choice and control over their actions.[15] 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. Furthermore, the Muʿtazilites affirm that the moral value of an act is objective and within the reach of reason. In other words, ethical terms such as "good" or "bad" refer to real and objective properties of acts. 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. The Ashʿarites embrace the doctrine of divine voluntarism that 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.

Although Hume was not exactly an Ashʿarite, the Ashʿarite undertone of his reasoning is not difficult to trace.[16] At any rate, the consequences of implementing Hume's recommendations would be that moral qualities would hardly have any value. Freud, theft, robbery, murder, deceit, hate crime, racism, etc. would have little negative consequences, since everyone is going to know in advance that no one is going to be harmed in the end because of God's secret interference. And if Hume argues that he does not require God to do it every time, his critic will ask, "How does Hume know that God is not already interfering every now and then, which is the reason the extent of these evils is within the limits?" So we will have to start all over again.[17] But more important, for Hume the telos of creation seems to be to maximize pleasure and remove pain, which would render meaningless such values as self-sacrifice, care for others, compassion, and the capacity to love. For instance, it is difficult to see how without challenges and obstacles one would be able to develop such spiritual qualities as compassion and selfless, unconditioned love. Most of all, such a custom-made paradise, I would argue, would defeat the very purpose of creation, which is about actualizing the perfections latent in the

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15 Atheist philosophers such as Mackie and Antony Flew (at the time Flew was still an atheist) recently argued that God could have constituted human nature in such a way that human beings would always "freely" choose the good. But as others pointed out, the concept of good makes little sense without any reference to temptation, fear, lust, envy, anxiety, etc. Moreover, it makes no sense to call a person morally good if that person is by self-constitution incapable of being tempted. More important, the idea of loving someone (e.g., God) does not sound intelligible if there is not the freedom to not love as well. Thus, the Muʿtazilite notion can still be defended. For more information, see Ninian Smart, "Omnipotence, Evil, and Superman," *Philosophy* 36 (1961): 188–195; Antony Flew, "Are Ninian Smart's Temptations Irresistible?" *Philosophy* 37, no. 139 (1962): 57–60; John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love* (London: The Macmillan Press, 1977), 266–277.

16 It is not unrelated that Hume and Ashʿarism also overlap when it comes to their respective versions of occasionalism. See, e.g., Steven Nadler, " 'No Necessary Connection': The Medieval Roots of the Occasionalist Roots of Hume," *The Monist* 79, no. 3 (1996): 448–466.

17 Moreover, can Hume guarantee that even such infrequent divine interferences would not lead to a total chaos in both the natural world and the moral life?

human self rather than producing weak, hedonistic human beings who might succumb to temptations easily. We will come back to this particular point, but for now, let us continue to deal with Hume's circumstances:

> But this ill would be very rare, were it not for the *third* circumstance which I proposed to mention, *viz.* the great frugality, with which all powers and faculties are distributed to every particular being. So well adjusted are the organs and capacities of all animals, and so well fitted to their preservation, that, as far as history or tradition reaches, there appears not to be any single species, which has yet been extinguished in the universe. . . . In order to cure most of the ills of human life, I require not that man should have the wings of the eagle, the swiftness of the stag, the force of the ox, the arms of the lion, the scales of the crocodile or rhinoceros; much less do I demand the sagacity of an angel or cherubim. I am contented to take an increase in one single power or faculty of his soul. Let him be endowed with a greater propensity to industry and labour; a more vigorous spring and activity of mind; a more constant bent to business and application. Let the whole species possess naturally an equal diligence with that which many individuals are able to attain by habit and reflection; and the most beneficial consequence, without any allay of ill, is the immediate and necessary result of this endowment. Almost all the moral, as well as natural evils of human life arise from idleness; and were our species, by the original constitution of their frame, exempt from this vice or infirmity, the perfect cultivation of land, the improvement of arts and manufactures, the exact execution of every office and duty, immediately follow; and men at once may fully reach that state of society, which is so imperfectly attained by the best regulated government.[18]

Once again, Hume's complaint here is related to the first two circumstances he delineated earlier: if only human beings were endowed with superabundant abilities beyond a strict minimal survival limit! We are too meagerly endowed with powers and, in particular, with our capacity for perseverance and success. If only there were no illnesses, idleness, attention deficit disorder (ADD), mental agitation, lack of self-confidence, and ailments of all sorts! How many of us have fallen behind deadlines in the wake of COVID-19 and have had to suffer both mentally and otherwise? And all Hume demands is a sort of upgrade on our abilities and natural gifts, not that we should have to have "wings of the eagle, the swiftness of the stag, the force of the ox, the arms of the lion, the scales of the crocodile, and so on."

A good response to such wish-fulfillment would be to suggest watching the film *Bruce Almighty* (2003).[19] The film offers an excellent thought-experiment on the various circumstances that Hume has laid out. Following his dismissal from job,

18 Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, XI, 82–84.
19 *Bruce Almighty*, directed by Tom Shadyac (Universal Pictures, 2003).

Bruce Nolan (Jim Carrey) lashes out at God and complains that He is the one who is responsible for all his misfortunes. Bruce then receives a surprising message, which ultimately takes him to a place where he meets God (Morgan Freeman). Following a rather rough introduction, God offers to give Bruce His powers to prove that He is managing the affairs of the world correctly. Endowed with divine powers, Bruce starts to use them for personal gain and various wish-fulfillments, e.g., he gets his job back. He soon finds ways of using his powers to cause miracles to occur at otherwise mundane events that he covers as a reporter. He also begins to hear voices in his head, which God explains are prayers, meant for God, but which Bruce now must deal with. Since the prayers are too many to handle individually, Bruce creates a program that automatically answers every prayer with an "Yes." But he soon discovers that the city has fallen into chaos due to his actions, since people have prayed for all sorts of things without realizing their consequences. Eventually, Bruce goes back to God and asks Him to take back His powers. The film ends on a good note, showing how Bruce's own wishes have been fulfilled the moment he decides to submit to God's will. The moral of the story is obvious (i.e., "Be careful what you wish for!"), so I will proceed to analyze Hume's fourth circumstance (or complaint):

> The *fourth* circumstance, whence arises the misery and ill of the universe, is the inaccurate workmanship of all the springs and principles of the great machine of nature. . . . One would imagine, that this grand production had not received the last hand of the maker; so little finished is every part, and so coarse are the strokes, with which it is executed. Thus, the winds are requisite to convey the vapours along the surface of the globe, and to assist men in navigation: But how oft, rising up to tempests and hurricanes, do they become pernicious? Rains are necessary to nourish all the plants and animals of the earth: But how often are they defective? How often excessive? Heat is requisite to all life and vegetation; but is not always found in the due proportion. On the mixture and secretion of the humours and juices of the body depend the health and prosperity of the animal: But the parts perform not regularly their proper function. What more useful than all the passions of the mind, ambition, vanity, love, anger? But how oft do they break their bounds, and cause the greatest convulsions in society? There is nothing so advantageous in the universe, but what frequently becomes pernicious, by its excess or defect; nor has nature guarded, with the requisite accuracy, against all disorder or confusion. The irregularity is never, perhaps, so great as to destroy any species; but is often sufficient to involve the individuals in ruin and misery.[20]

At first blush, what Hume is suggesting here might sound quite reasonable. That is, what we observe in nature as ordained by Providence may be just enough to keep us going, but could the universe not have been less hostile or contain less

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20 Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, XI, 84–85.

evil than what we encounter at present? Granted, we need fire for survival, but need there be giant wildfires that destroy town after town causing havoc? Granted, there are viruses and diseases that humans have to fight against, but should there be something like the COVID-19 pandemic that claimed millions of lives, including children? Granted, human life would not make sense without such emotions as love, anger, ambition, etc., but how often do they lead to horrendous forms of suffering, as one sees in the case of E2? And what about animal suffering such as the case of a fawn trapped in a forest fire and horribly burned due to a lightning strike (i.e., E1)?[21] All this is to say, Hume and his followers grant that some evil is unavoidable, but need there be such pointless evils as E1 and E2? What does this say about the nature of God?

III

Unlike his modern followers, Hume does not reject the existence of God because of evils in the world. He rather concludes by saying that God must be impersonal and does not care about human suffering in the world.[22] It is interesting that long before Hume, in around 1000 BC, a Babylonian priest named Saggil-kinam-ubbib composed a poem entitled "Theodicy," in which he reaches a very similar conclusion.[23] The poem was composed in the form of a dialogue and can be summarized as follows. The character identified as Sufferer was orphaned at an early stage and seemed to find no way out of his suffering. He tried to be more religious and pious, but it did not ameliorate his situation. Moreover, he argues that the rich and the powerful always turn the situation in their favor, and many criminals seem to get away with their crimes. Furthermore, those who neglect God seem to be rich, while those who pray seem to be poor. All of these, the Sufferer argues, show that

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21 For example, J. S. Mill says, "[T]hose who flatter themselves with the notion of reading the purposes of the Creator in his works, ought in consistency to have seen grounds for inferences from which they have shrunk. If there are any marks at all of special design in creation, one of the things most evidently designed is that a large proportion of all animals should pass their existence in tormenting and devouring other animals. . . . If a tenth part of the pains which have been expended in finding benevolent adaptations in all nature . . . what scope for comment would not have been found in the entire existence of the lower animals, divided, with scarcely an exception, into devourers and devoured, and a prey to a thousand ills from which they are denied the faculties necessary for protecting themselves!" See J. S. Mill, *Three Essays on Religion*, ed. Louis J. Matz (New York: Broadview Press, 2009), 99–100. This is a highly subjective appraisal. If animals do not devour each other at a certain rate, what is going to control animal overpopulation? Also, if we are so concerned with animal pain, why is it that billions of people still choose to consume animal meat? This, of course, does not mean we should not be concerned with animal pain. On the contrary, the Islamic tradition offers a treasury of ethical resources in order to deal with animals and their welfare. Many Islamic philosophers such as Mullā Ṣadrā even affirm "animal resurrection." See, Mullā Ṣadrā, *al-Shawāhid al-rubūbiyya*, ed. Jalāl al-Dīn Āshtiyānī (Mashhad: Chāpkhānah-yi Dānishgāh-i Mashhad, 1967), 261–335.

22 Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, XI, 85.

23 W. G. Lambert, "The Babylonian *Theodicy*," in *Babylonian Wisdom Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1960), 63–90.

God does not prevent evil in society. In response, the character identified as Friend argues that many of these events are a fact of common destiny, implying that many people go through both happiness and suffering in their life. For him, wealth and prosperity can also be the result of one's piety. More important, he argues that it is often difficult for humans to make sense of the divine mind, but wrongdoers will certainly face a terrible outcome. In the end, without rejecting the existence of God, they both agree that God does not care much about human suffering.[24]

The point of this analysis is to show that while the problem of suffering is an ancient issue, it did not necessitate people to disbelieve in God across most of the known cultures. So it is rather strange that Hume's successors and atheist philosophers would use the problem of evil to argue against God's existence.[25] But to be fair to contemporary Humeans, they only claim the non-existence of God in probabilistic terms or using inference to the best explanation. For instance, philosophers such as Rowe also use the Bayesian approach to argue that it is unlikely that God exists.[26] One cannot help noting the *irony* in applying such approaches, since Bayesian probability originates with Thomas Bayes—an 18th-century clergyman and a mathematician—who tried to prove the existence of God through his novel statistical method![27] Moreover, it does not help to reduce and quantify a multidimensional philosophical issue to a set of probability claims and assign various quantitative values.

IV

Be that as it may, we are now in a position to offer a response to the Humean understanding of evil and suffering. Let us first uncover the assumptions in the Humean approach:

- The assumption of anthropomorphism, i.e., attributing arbitrary human characteristics to God (or expecting God to behave like humans);
- The assumption of the "pleasure principle," i.e., the instinctive seeking of pleasure and avoiding of pain, as the defining characteristic of the self;[28]

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24 Lambert, "Babylonian Theodicy," 86–87.
25 One wonders if there is a psychological reason behind it. Could it be the horrible memory of the World War II? One is reminded of the following utterance by a Holocaust victim: "If there is a God, He will have to beg my forgiveness." See Jennifer Lassley, "A Defective Covenant: Abandonment of Faith Among Jewish Survivors of the Holocaust," *International Social Science Review* 90, no. 2 (2015): 1–17. See also, Zachary Braiterman, *(God) After Auschwitz: Tradition and Change in Post-Holocaust Jewish Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), which considers the collapse of theodicy and the strategic reinvention of tradition by critically appraising theological and textual revision in the post-Holocaust writings of Jewish thinkers.
26 William Rowe, "The Evidential Argument from Evil: A Second Look," in *The Evidential Argument from Evil*, ed. Daniel Howard-Snyder (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1996), 262–285. See also, Michael Tooley, *The Problem of Evil* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 37ff.
27 Thomas Bayes, "An Essay Towards Solving a Problem in the Doctrine of Chances," *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London* 53 (1763): 370–418.
28 The expression is from Freudian psychology, but its usage in this chapter has little relationship to it.

- The assumption that the world is full of suffering, or at the very least, life contains more suffering than joy;
- The assumption of a mechanistic worldview, all of nature works according to mechanical laws, and everything in the material world can be explained in terms of the arrangement and movements of its parts.

Before discussing the problems with each of these assumptions, let us grant, for the sake of argument, that they are all true and that God's existence is highly unlikely. One now wonders how atheism would make sense of the horrible cases of E1 and E2. The atheist would invoke "natural selection," which involves survival of the fittest. According to the standard scientific account, the earth is approximately four and a half billion years old, and in this long period innumerable organisms and species have competed and struggled for survival. In this cruel and blind system of the evolutionary process, only the stronger survive, but even they will eventually perish, often in a helpless manner. Regarding the cruelty of nature, philosopher Holmes Rolston III speaks of such evils as predation, parasitism, selfishness, randomness, blindness, disaster, indifference, waste, struggle, suffering, and death.[29] And Richard Dawkins concurs by affirming that natural selection is a very unpleasant process.[30]

In a recent article, Yujin Nagasawa has coined the term *systemic evil* to refer to the entire biological system characterized by the cruelty and blindness of the evolutionary process.[31] In such a paradigm, instances of horrendous evil such as E1 and E2 are simply unfortunate consequences of the systemic evil of nature, period (since it is pointless to question a blind process). While E2 is a combination of both moral and natural evil (natural evil because the man in question is, after all, a product of nature), allowing us to hold the offender accountable for his actions, we can easily think of cases which involve a more complicated scenario. For example, think of someone who has a sibling on the autism spectrum (henceforth case X). Her situation is such that she is unable to communicate with others, since due to hearing issues she never managed to learn a language. In other words, she is both deaf and dumb. In addition to the communication problem, she also suffers from several physical and mental disorders. At times her behavior turns so violent and hyper that she starts banging her forehead against the wall to the point of being covered in blood. Let us also imagine that the parents have availed themselves of all the possible treatments, but her situation did not improve. How can we now justify this situation in terms of the blind processes of nature, except to say that they are what they are, i.e., selfish, random, and indifferent? It is thus not difficult to see how in atheistic naturalism the problem of systemic evil leads one to a dead end.

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29 Rolston, Holmes III, "Does Nature Need to Be Redeemed?" *Zygon* 29, no. 2 (1994): 212.

30 Frank Miele, "Darwin's Dangerous Disciple: An Interview with Richard Dawkins," *Scepsis* 3, no. 4 (1995), https://scepsis.net/eng/articles/id_3.php/ (last accessed March 20, 2022).

31 Yujin Nagasawa, "The Problem of Evil for Atheists," in *The Problem of Evil: Eight Views in Dialogue*, ed. N. Trakakis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 151–175.

Added to these examples are the extreme cases of Hitlers and Mussolinis, whose crimes should far exceed merely a mortal death.

This then brings us back to the sphere of transcendence, where the problem of evil and suffering fares much better. But the reason why the problem of evil baffles the minds of so many people today has to do with a flawed understanding of the nature of God and of the purpose of creation, including human beings' place in it. The God that is presupposed in Humean approaches to evil is a father-like figure who looks at His creation in terms of human emotions. And when atheist philosophers acknowledge that God can be conceived in terms of being itself, i.e., as Ultimate Reality, they think such a notion of God is irrelevant in discussions of evil and suffering since humans cannot relate to (or worship) such a meta-personal deity. Recall that Hume himself reaches a deistic conception of the divine. So it is imperative that we clarify what we mean by "God."

God is the Supreme Principle, Who is at once Absolute, Infinite, and the All-Perfect.[32] And being Absolute, It is also Beyond-Being, which is beyond any name, form, or conceptualization. That is, the Absolute as such is beyond any determination or manifestation, and yet the infinity or the all-possibility of the Absolute implies that It cannot but give rise to the cosmos or the world. Consequently, the Absolute qua Beyond-Being self-determines Itself into Being, which engenders cosmic existence or the world of becoming. Therefore, attributes such as omniscience, goodness, or omnipotence pertain to Being rather than to Beyond-Being. In other words, there is a distinction between the "Personal God" and meta-personal divinity in that the former enters into a relationship with Its manifestation, whereas the latter is beyond all relationalities. Moreover, Beyond-Being is absolute necessity in itself, whereas Being is absolute necessity in relation to the cosmos but not in relation to Beyond-Being. In fact, Being is the first self-determination of Beyond-Being or the Absolute as such, arising due to Its inner infinitude, and thus opening the door to the overflowing of endlessly inexhaustible ontological possibilities. And it is here that the metaphysical roots of evil are to be found. So the more fundamental question is not "Why does a good God create a world in which there is evil?," rather "Why does a Perfect (and Good) God create an *imperfect world*?" Islamic philosophers such as Ibn ʿArabī and Mullā Ṣadrā respond to this question by arguing that it has to do with divine infinitude, which implies infinite possibilities, including the possibility of negating God's own goodness.[33] Rūmī

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32 This view is shaped by my study of Islamic metaphysics, particularly as it is represented by the School of Ibn ʿArabī.

33 For Ibn ʿArabī's reflections on evil, see Özgür Koca, "Ibn ʿArabī (1165–1240) and Rūmī (1207–1273) on the Question of Evil: Discontinuities in Sufi Metaphysics," *Islam and Christian—Muslim Relations* 28, no. 3 (2017): 293–311. Mullā Ṣadrā explains evil through his gradational ontology (*tashkīk al-wujūd*), which is the most appropriate way of thinking about God's providential care in its totality—distinguishing between the contingent effects of God in their undifferentiated reality from the differentiated details of the hierarchy of the cosmos. For Mullā Ṣadrā, the created order is a direct manifestation of the overabundant mercy of God, and hence it remains unaffected by the

expresses the same truth in a more poetic (but profound) manner when he says that "divine infinitude" mirrors the case of a perfect painter who must be able to paint an ugly painting, so as to show that she possesses all levels of perfection as an artist.[34]

So Hume is partially right to surmise that God qua Beyond-Being is unrelated to the world. But his mistakes lie in failing to distinguish between Beyond-Being and Being, and the fact that they, nevertheless, constitute a single reality. This is not difficult to understand once we take into consideration the fact that God's reality is also defined by His names and attributes. In terms of Islamic metaphysics, one would say that the Divine Essence (*al-dhāt al-ilāhī*) or Beyond-Being is beyond all names and attributes (as It contains them in an undifferentiated manner), whereas Being (*al-wujūd*) contains all the divine names and attributes in a differentiated manner.[35] And it is important to note that these names and attributes are character-ized not only by unity and uniformity but also by opposition, diversity, and contra-riety. Hence just as God is named as "the guide" (*al-hādī*), He is also named as "the one who misguides" (*al-muḍill*). Similarly, God is both the forgiver (*al-ghaffār*) and the avenger (*al-muntaqim*), the giver of life (*al-muḥyī*) as well as the giver of death (*al-mumīt*), the all-merciful (*al-raḥmān*) and the one who can harm and cause distress (*al-ḍārr*), the manifest (*al-ẓāhir*) and the hidden (*al-bāṭin*), and so on. So the apparent discord, strife, and suffering that one observes in the world emanate from the opposition and diversity of the divine names, which is to say that asking God to create a world without any evil is akin to *asking God to stop being God*, that is, the Infinite cannot but manifest Its inexhaustible possibilities.[36] But it is impor-tant to note that God's attributes of mercy and compassion trump His attributes of majesty, such as being vengeful, so that Ultimate Reality is not envisaged in term of a dualistic tension between good and evil. Regardless, let us pause to see how all these views challenge the narrow, anthropomorphic conception of God, which is the target of atheist philosophers.

V

In the narrow, anthropomorphic view, God is conceived in terms of His attributes of benevolence and goodness. But the view of God presented here suggests that He can sometimes misguide, and even cause harm. In addition, the Quran also calls

particular occurrences of evil such as the earthquake or the atrocious act of a despot, since in the final analysis, the relative existence of evil facilitates a greater good. For more information, see Saj-jad Rizvi, "Considering Divine Providence in Mullā Ṣadrā Šīrāzī (d. 1045/1636): The Problem of Evil, Theodicy, and the Divine Eros," *Oriens* 49, nos. 3–4 (2021): 318–369.

34 See Koca, "Ibn ʿArabī (1165–1240) and Rūmī (1207–1273), 305." See also, Nasrin Rouzati, "Evil and Human Suffering in Islamic Thought—Towards a Mystical Theodicy," *Religions* 9, no. 47 (2017): 1–13.

35 See e.g., Dāwūd al-Qayṣarī, *Maṭlaʿ khuṣūṣ al-kalim fī maʿānī Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam (Sharḥ Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam)*, ed. Jalāl al-Dīn Āshtīyānī (Qum: Būstān-i Kitāb, 2008).

36 On the other hand, if the world is all-perfect, it would already be God.

God "the best of plotters" (*khayr al-mākirīn*).[37] So someone might object to all this by arguing that "plotting" and other attributes expressing a negative relationship imply deceit, deception, and harm, and these can hardly be qualities of a good God. If God plots, then He schemes; and if He schemes, then this implies some sort of deceitful activity, which means He cannot be God. Now one may argue that "plotting" can sometimes be motivated by love and care of people. For example, in order to make it on time for the lecture, a professor had to come up with a "plot" with his wife of how they would divert their one-year-old's attention to another part of the house so that he could escape. Simply trying to leave the house was not an option for this professor, since that would make the child sad, which would then require the professor to console his child, which would mean he would likely be late for the lecture. Or worse, he would have to drive faster than usual to work, thereby putting himself and others at risk on the road.[38] In a nutshell, plotting need not always be evil, and if this is true on the human plane, how much truer it would be on the divine plane. But let us reemphasize that God has both "personal" and "meta-personal" aspects. The meta-personal aspect explains the metaphysical roots of evil, while the personal aspect explains how God is involved with His creation.

Now someone might still object that this way of looking at things already pre-supposes the existence of God, whereas one is meant to argue for or against the existence of God based on the phenomena of evil—and not the other way round. This is a false reasoning. The Humean tradition sets up the problem of evil in such a unilateral way that its opponents have no choice but to put all their eggs in one basket. To wit, the atheist points out some examples of evil in the world and then argues that since these evils seem pointless, they must make the exist-ence of God unlikely, Who is supposed to be good and benevolent. This way of setting up the issue then compels the theist philosopher to seek a "justification" at any cost. Hence, various "justification" stories have been suggested such as open theism, which states that God does not know the future, or the acknowledgement thesis, which acknowledges that God can be "imperfect," or an appeal to the human inability to fathom the divine mind. Needless to say, none of these proposals are satisfactory. But what is left undiscussed in all of this is that the theist or non-theist philosopher does not need to consider the existence or the non-existence of God in relation to the problem of evil. The theist or non-theist philosopher can prove the existence of God through various traditional arguments, which do not require dis-cussing evil. In other words, the evidential problem of evil does not by itself invali-date the traditional arguments for God's existence, and the theist has every reason to seek their certitude from them when discussing evil. What this means is that once the theist has certitude about God's existence through the traditional cosmological or ontological arguments, the problem of evil ceases to be a threat to God's exist-ence; the issue then rests on how to best explain evil in the overall scheme of divine

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37 Q 3:54 and 8:30.

38 Adapted from Mohammed Rustom, "On Listening: Hearing God's Voice in the Face of Suffering," *Sacred Web* 45 (2020): 36–43.

providence. This is perhaps the reason why, in the Islamic tradition, the "problem of evil" is not presented as a *problem* but rather as an instrument to bring about the human's spiritual development and ultimate perfection.[39] I shall soon discuss the spiritual meaning of suffering and return to the cases of E1, E2, and X, but before that, a short detour to a philosophical argument for the existence of God is in order.

As is well-known, there are various ontological, cosmological, teleological, aesthetic, logical, and moral arguments for God's existence. In my opinion, they all have to be considered in relation to, and not in isolation from, one another. This is because arguments for God are often related to one's given notion of God, and different religious/metaphysical traditions offer varied conceptions of Ultimate Reality. In any event, given the wide range of arguments for God's existence in the Islamic tradition, I will now provide a short reconstruction of Avicenna's famous position wherein he offers what can be called the most sophisticated "onto-cosmological" proof.[40] This argument can be framed in terms of the key question, "Can contingent beings be self-caused, even though their series may involve an infinite chain?" In response, physicists such as Stephen Hawking may invoke the "no boundary proposal" (i.e., space-time not delimited by any original singularity) to affirm a self-caused universe, but the empirical validity of such a speculative and extrapolative (based on our understanding of current physical theories) theory is widely doubted.[41] For Avicenna, however, the contingent can only become necessary through another entity, and this is perhaps the most significant bone of contention between contemporary naturalists and traditional philosophers. For a naturalist, it is fine to imagine a contingent initial natural causal state (contingent either because the existence of the entities involved in that initial state is contingent or because at least some of the properties of the entities involved in that initial state are contingent). But for Avicenna and many others in the Islamic tradition, contingent beings, by definition, lack "eternal necessity," which necessitates their existentiation through something that must have eternal necessity in itself. And only being or existence (*wujūd*) fits the bill. Take any entity, e.g., a triangle, and you will find it possesses an "essential" but not "eternal" necessity. That is, in every possible world, the definition of a triangle will hold, but that does not necessitate its "eternal" existence.

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39 That it was not presented as a "problem" can be gleaned from the works of such influential philosophers as Avicenna, Suhrawardī, and Mullā Ṣadrā. That is, Avicenna et al. discuss "evil" in the context of "divine providence" (*al-ʿināya al-ilāhiyya*). See Avicenna, *The Metaphysics of the Healing*, trans. M. E. Marmura (Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 2005), 339–346; Mullā Ṣadrā, *al-Ḥikma al-mutaʿāliya fiʾl-asfār al-ʿaqliyya al-arbaʿa*, ed. Gholamreza Aavani et al. (Tehran: Bunyād-i Ḥikmat-i Islāmi-yi Ṣadrā, 2003), 7:71ff.

40 See Avicenna, *al-Ishārāt waʾl-tanbīhāt*, ed. Sulaymān Dunyā (Cairo: Dār al-Maʿārif, 1957–1060), 3:15–27. For the standard commentaries on the *Ishārāt*, see Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt waʾl-tanbīhāt*, ed. ʿAlī Riḍā Najafzādah (Tehran: Anjuman-i Āthār wa-Mafākhir-i Farhangī, 2005); Ṭūsī's commentary is included in the Sulaymān Dunyā edition cited above.

41 For an illuminating discussion of the issues of the "origin of the universe" from a physicist's point of view, see Hawking's colleague George Ellis's article "Before the Beginning: Emerging Questions and Uncertainties," in *Toward a New Millennium in Galaxy Morphology*, ed. D. L. Block et al. (Dordrecht: Springer, 2000), 693–720.

Yet, even if we grant an infinite chain of contingent beings, the series cannot become necessary except through another. For brevity of space, I will skip over the other premises, but this argument, which I call the "argument from contingency," proves that the series of a chain of contingent beings necessarily terminates in that whose existence is necessary in itself, i.e., God.[42]

VI

With the existence of God now established, we can proceed to discuss the goal of creation in Islamic metaphysics, which would deconstruct the second assumption in Humean approaches to evil, namely the pleasure principle. According to Ibn ʿArabī, God wanted to see His own infinite reality in an all-inclusive object encompassing the totality of His never-ending self-manifestation, so that He would have objective self-knowledge.[43] So God brings into existence a comprehensive being, identified as the perfect human (*al-insān al-kāmil*) so that He may see His own perfection in the mirror of the former. Accordingly, Adam or the prototype of the perfect human was created in the form of the name *Allah* (i.e., the Absolute), which contains the perfection of all the divine names and attributes. Now it may be asked at this point, why did God, whose Essence already contained infinite perfection, wish to see Himself in the mirror of another being? Did not God already "see" His perfection before the creation of the perfect human? In response, the Sufis would say that even though God did witness Himself (i.e., His names and qualities) *before* the creation of the perfect human, this witnessing was through His own Essence and not through an external form. For the act of seeing oneself in oneself is different from the act of seeing oneself in another being, which would be like a mirror to the former. In the case of the former, i.e., seeing oneself in oneself, the witnessing takes place without any intermediary, whereas in the case of the latter, the act of seeing is materialized through an intermediary, which is the reality of the perfect human. Moreover, although this act of vision is still within the Divine Essence in the sense that nothing can be outside of God, yet it is an outward projection of the Divine Self manifested in "external reality." Thus, the perfect human is the very mirror through which the Divine Essence manifests Itself. As is known, Adam forgets to abide by the divine command at some point and, consequently, falls from paradise. But for Ibn ʿArabī, Adam's banishment from paradise should be understood as a descent from place and not from level. That is, the expulsion from paradise allowed Adam (i.e., humanity in general) to realize his own latent capacity for "wholeness and perfection" and thereby rise above all created beings to become a symbol of God's own perfection, love, and goodness. Since every

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42 Also, most of the historical arguments tend to prove God's existence from the radical contingency of the world. This is evident whether one is considering the world in terms of the Aristotelian notions of potentiality and actuality or the Neoplatonic notion of composite or the Avicennan/Thomist conception of a composite of essence and existence.

43 Ibn ʿArabī. *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*, ed. A. E. Afifi (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-ʿArabī, 2002), 48–49.

human self contains the seed of the perfect human (by being born into the human state), the goal of life is to actualize self-perfection and be a perfect mirror where the Divine can behold Its reality. In simple terms, this is about knowing and loving God inasmuch as it is about God's knowing and loving Himself through us. Since God is the source of all love, peace, and beauty, it is only by participating in His reality that we can come to fulfil the deepest meaning of life.

Yet, as numerous Sufi philosophers have stated, what comes as a "veil" (*ḥijāb*) between the perfect human and the reality of God is our egocentric self with all its selfish desires and machinations (i.e., the pleasure principle). Sufis further argue that it is hard to overcome this egocentric self except through profound suffering, since most of us take it to be our real self. Therefore, in the spiritual universe, pain and suffering allow us to ascend to reality. From Rūmī's perspective, the most important phase in our spiritual journey involves knowing the self and ultimately recognizing that we have been separated from our original source *in divinis*. By employing the symbolism of the "reed" as the lament of the perfect human, Rūmī in his *Masnavī* illuminates for the reader that this existential separation is the primary cause of our suffering in this life.[44] Humans tend to forget their divine origin and busy themselves with worldly attainments; so in order to awaken them from the state of forgetfulness, suffering can be an elixir which is both alchemical and transformative.

The positive value of suffering can be gleaned from other contexts as well.[45] For instance, suffering helps us bond with God and remain inwardly content, even in the midst of a great trial. Rūmī gives us a fascinating juxtaposition between the hard-hearted Pharaoh and those who are stricken with grief. God gave Pharaoh the empire of the world, but He did not grace him with pain, suffering, and hardship. Pharaoh thus never experienced a single moment of suffering—a state that would impel him to call upon God for help. After all, grief is worth more than all of this world; and this is because it causes the grief-stricken to call upon God fervently, thereby drawing them closer to the divine.[46] At the deepest level, however, suffering brings about a hidden mercy from the treasury of divine possibilities. This is to say that God cannot "be" God if people are not needy.[47]

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44 See Baḥr al-ʿUlūm, *Tafsīr-i ʿirfānī-yi Masnavī-yi Maʿnawī* (Tehran: Intishārāt-i Īrān Yārān, 2006), 1:2–4.

45 For instance, suffering leads to spiritual growth, self-purification, and inner peace, see Muhammad Faruque, "Untying the Knots of Love: The Qur'an, Love Poetry, and Akkad's The Message," *Journal of Islamic and Muslim Studies* 5, no. 2 (2020): 112–128.

46 Rūmī, *Masnavī-yi maʿnawī*, ed. and trans. by R. A. Nicholson as *The Mathnawí of Jalálu'ddín Rúmí* (London: Luzac, 1924–1940), book 3, verses 200–207.

47 One is also reminded of the story of Job in the Bible. By the standards of his day, Job's suffering can only be a sign that he is a great sinner. Resisting that implication, however, he demands that God explain why he, a good man, is being so badly treated. Moreover, he argues that his case shows that God is not governing the world through justice, and he argues that the prosperity of the wicked and the suffering of the righteous in general are further evidence of God's not showing justice. When He replies to Job, God speaks of His wisdom and providence in creating and maintaining

This view of suffering is very much in synchrony with the Quranic perspective, which presents evil and suffering as part and parcel of life. There are numerous verses in the Quran which talk about the *dunyā* or the earthly life with its "abode of trials and suffering" and an "abode of false pleasure." For instance, Q 2:155–157 presents a view of life in which trials, disappointments, and suffering are very much the reality of the earthly life:

> And surely We shall try you with something of fear and hunger, and loss of wealth and lives and crops; but give glad tidings to the steadfast, who say, when a misfortune strikes them: Lo! we are God's and Lo! unto Him we are returning. Such are they on whom are blessings from their Lord, and mercy. Such are the rightly guided. (Q 2:155–157)

In other places, the Quran talks about the trials and intense emotional challenges that most prophets or prophetic figures have faced during their lives.[48] Similarly, the *dunyā* is presented as a place where people run after vain glory and false pleasure:

> Know that the life of this world is mere play, and idle talk, and spectacle, and boasting to one another, and rivalry in respect of wealth and children. . . . And in the hereafter, there is grievous punishment, but also forgiveness from God and His good pleasure, whereas the earthly life is but a playful illusion (Q 57:20)[49]

One thus wonders why it is that the same Creator who created the world also cautions us against this world. The answer lies in the Sufi idea of "appearance and reality" (*ṣūra wa-maʿnā*), which tells us that life in this world is to be negated insofar as it hides us from the reality of God. In other words, when we identify with our egocentric self and become oblivious to our inner reality as defined by the perfect

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the universe, implying that human knowledge of things is limited. Job realizes his mistakes and repents. In response to Job's suffering, Carl Jung contends that it is pointless to test Job when God already knows that Job will turn out to be faithful in the end. Moreover, in making Job suffer, Jung opines, God has actually exposed Himself to be lacking moral consciousness, justice, goodness, and all other related divine attributes. One can respond to this by asking whether it make sense to psychologize God and project one's own insecurities on Him, especially when we do not yet know the range of interpretations that these kinds of parables might offer. See Carl Jung, *Answer to Job*, trans. R. F. C. Hull (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1954), 3–92.

48　See, e.g., Aḥmad Samʿānī, *The Repose of the Spirits: A Sufi Commentary on the Divine Names*, trans. William Chittick (Albany: SUNY Press, 2019), 42–43.

49　One indirect indication of this is the comparatively higher rates of depression, suicide, and other DSM-5 mental disorders in rich and affluent countries. That is, materialism cannot be our answer to peace and happiness. In fact, it leads to both self-alienation and alienation from nature. See, for example, A. M. Ruscio et al., "Cross-Sectional Comparison of the Epidemiology of DSM-5 Generalized Anxiety Disorder Across the Globe," *JAMA Psychiatry* 74, no. 5 (2017): 465–475.

human, God's reality remains hidden from us. So the important question is not why there is suffering in this world, rather whether God has given us enough means to overcome these evils and suffering.

In light of the doctrine of the perfect human, the answer is in the affirmative because, being created in the image of God, we already contain all the spiritual resources to overcome every challenge, except that these inner resources are veiled by our egocentric self. In other words, God has already given us all that Hume was asking for. But Hume's mechanistic outlook made him ask God to artificially place such traits as speed, patience, and resilience in him. That is, instead of seeking these traits *within* himself, he was looking elsewhere. All this is to say, the telos of creation is not the weak, hedonistic, egocentric self. Nor it is matter or the physical cosmos with its imperfections, which are necessitated by the divine infinitude. Rather, from God's point of view, it is the perfect human who is the *raison d'être* of the universe.

One may thus grant that evil and suffering in a religious universe can be a source of great spiritual reckoning and spiritual development. Perhaps in such a context suffering does make sense, for the most part. But the skeptic may still wonder about the cases of E1, E2, and X since they do not serve any spiritual purpose, or so it appears. Could God not prevent these horrendous evils? At this point in our foray into the problem of evil in this chapter, we have come a long way to see that such questions are ill posed. It is a pessimistic outlook that always finds the glass half empty. Recall that one of the assumptions underlying the Humean approach to evil is to claim that the world is full of suffering and that cases such as E1 and E2 are fairly common, which yield no spiritual benefit. Yet this is an assumption that can never be proven statistically. This is because suffering is not "measurable." But more to the point, it is simply not possible to interview the world's eight billion people in order to show that more than half the population actually believe that their life—as far as they can see it—contains more pain and suffering than peace and happiness. It might seem difficult to believe, especially since we are constantly inundated with terrible news across the globe, but the media hardly documents all the happy moments that people experience all over the world, even in the midst of tragedies. Take the example of the *Late Show* host Stephen Colbert, whose life has been shaped by tragedy. When he was barely ten years old, his father and two of his older brothers died suddenly in an aviation accident. The subsequent investigation revealed that avoidable crew errors led to the accident, which killed 72 of the 82 people on board. When asked how such a tragedy would not destroy any certitude that God exists, Colbert explains that his basic disposition towards the world is gratitude. "I'm very grateful to be alive," he says. "And so that act, that impulse to be grateful, wants an object. That object I call God." In fact, Colbert goes a step further and asserts that every punishment from God can be seen as a gift.[50] I would venture to say such an attitude is fairly

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50 Sullivan and Blaschko, *Good Life Method*, 153–154.

widespread across the world, where most people still believe in God and find meaning through God amid suffering.

VII

It is, nonetheless, possible to find more specific explanations for tragic incidents such as E1 and E2 (I believe I have already offered more general answers). Recall the story of Moses and Khiḍr, where Moses was horrified to see his companion killing a boy and sinking a boat for no reason. However, Khiḍr later reveals that he killed the boy because his parents were true believers, whereas he would grow up to be a disbeliever and pressure his parents into defiance and disbelief. Moreover, he knew that God would favor the parents with a more virtuous and caring child. As for the boat, Khiḍr informs Moses that there was a tyrant ahead of the people who owned the boat, and this tyrant seizes every good boat by force. But it is important to emphasize that not anyone can take on the role of Khiḍr in the Quran and justify apparently "unlawful" actions in the name of some future catastrophe. One has to take into consideration the underlying intention behind such stories in sacred scriptures. Regardless, it matters little whether or not skeptics and atheists find these explanations plausible, since it would not do to expect God to behave like humans. Nonetheless, the story of the boy shows that he was saved from future sins that would have sullied his destiny (i.e., more suffering). Similar explanations can be offered for the boat incident, and by analogy for E1 and E2. Moreover, when it comes to cases such as E1, E2, or X, one has to consider the totality of their existential return to God, which involves all the stages of their journey, in addition to their earthly life. It would be premature to judge an affair either good or evil based on the appearance of the earthly life alone, whose temporal scale is insignificant compared to the everlasting life of the spirit (notice that none of these explanations/resources are available to the atheist in their materialist ontology). Moreover, as we explained before, demanding a secret interference by God *à la* Hume would only exacerbate the situation, since we cannot foresee all the ripple effects because of a given interference. If it is objected that the issue lies with the form and intensity of evil, and not with evil as such, it may be replied that God cannot alter the laws of nature, which He Himself has put in place. That is, the nature of fire is to burn, and it will not distinguish between a saint and a sinner when it comes to burning things. Likewise, God need not change the rule of the principle of non-contradiction (PNC) or make a triangle with four sides. Similarly, He cannot artificially change the nature of the egocentric self, which is prone to evil (called *al-nafs al-ammāra* or the evil-prone self in the Quran), but He has given us the necessary intelligence, agency, and discernment to choose right from wrong and journey towards realizing our true self, which is free of all pain and suffering. All in all, it thus seems unreasonable to think that when it comes to evil God owes us everything, whereas we owe Him nothing. So when

confronted with evil and suffering, instead of asking "Where is God?," it makes more sense to ask, "Where are you?"

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