



ORIGINAL ARTICLE

## Muslim philosophers on the privation theory of evil

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### Abstract

Muslim philosophers commonly endorse a version of the so-called ‘privation theory of evil’ (PTE), according to which all essential evils consist in the non-existence of an entity or privation of a deserved perfection. In this article, I first provide a short sketch of PTE based on clarification of its main conceptual components. Then I examine the main reasons for the truth of PTE offered by Muslim philosophers and show that none of them is sufficiently plausible. Finally, I investigate the most significant objections against PTE and criticize the proposed responses.

**Keywords:** Nature of evil; privation theory; pain; moral evil; Muslim philosophers; Avicenna; Mullā Ṣadrā

### Introduction

From the beginning of the emergence of the Islamic philosophy, prominent Muslim philosophers, such as Avicenna, Suhrawardī, and Mullā Ṣadrā (as the founders of the Peripatetic, Illuminationist, and Transcendent schools, respectively) have been engaged in some versions of the theoretical problem of evil. For most of them, the main question was a very familiar one: why does God permit evil? Or, to use their own philosophical jargon, regarding God’s absolute and unlimited goodness, why and how does evil enter the realm of His decree and predetermination (*qaḍāʾ*)?<sup>1</sup>

In order to furnish a reasonable response to this problem, a complicated theodicy has been gradually developed which deploys a cluster of philosophical and theological theses.<sup>2</sup> This response, to use a contemporary term, may be seen as a version of ‘the greater goods theodicy’.

A very brief exposition of this solution could be given as follows: Evil (in the relevant sense) is present just in some parts of the universe, that is, in the natural world (sublunary sphere). Consequently, the world of immaterial objects (abstract intellects) is entirely free of any kinds of evil. In the natural world, however, evils are less than goods. Moreover, these numerically lesser (*aqalli*) evils are *necessary* consequences of and necessary means for the numerically greater (*akthari*) goods. Therefore, though the omnipotent God can prevent the occurrence of evil in the sublunary world, this will inevitably lead to the non-existence of the correlate greater good. This means that the only way for God to prevent evils is to prevent greater goods and this obviously seems odd and unreasonable.

To explain the necessary connection between lesser evils and greater goods, some essential features of the natural world, such as the existence of matter, potentiality,

opposition (*taḍād*), etc., are highlighted and then it is argued that the lesser evils are the necessary consequences of these essential features. The natural world, insofar as it contains the greater amount of goods, is overall good and thus it must be created by God. Consequently, the lesser evils in this world are inevitable. The final answer to the above-mentioned question, then, can be summarized as follows: considering the necessary correlation between evil and good, the former becomes subject of Divine decree only *secondarily* (*thānian*) or *accidentally* (*bi al-ʿaraḍ*) and what is decreed by God *primarily* (*awallan*) or *essentially* (*bi al-dhāt*) is nothing but good.

One of the preliminary issues needed for developing this theodicy concerns the nature of evil. The rather dominant view among Muslim philosophers is that real evils have a negative nature in the sense that their reality consists in mere non-existence and privation.<sup>3</sup> Following the current terminology, we may call this ‘the privation theory of evil’ (henceforth PTE). Some Muslim philosophers trace this theory back to Plato. Mīr Dāmād, for example, says that PTE ‘is a principle by means of which Plato, the theosopher, refuted the doubt instilled by the dualists in order to prove two creators; the creator of goods and that of evils’.<sup>4</sup> Though the very early roots of PTE could be traced back to Plato and Aristotle, PTE is typically taken as a neo-platonic idea. For it was Plotinus who introduced it in a detailed and comprehensive fashion. In a very famous passage, he writes: ‘Indeed, if all that exists were these beings and what transcends them, evil would not exist among Beings, or in what transcends them. For these Beings are good. So, it remains that if evil does exist, it exists among non-beings as a sort of form of non-being’ (Plotinus (2018), I.8.3).<sup>5</sup>

During the Middle Ages PTE was supported and developed by some Christian philosophers and theologians such as Augustine (354–430) and Aquinas (1225–1274). Rejecting the Manichean view of the substantiality of evil, Augustine endorses the idea that evil is but the *privatio boni* (the privation or removal of good). As Augustine puts it: ‘In this universe even that which is called evil, well ordered and kept in its place, sets the good in higher relief . . . [W]hat else is that which is called evil but a removal of good.’<sup>6</sup> And: ‘It [evil] is nothing but the corruption of natural measure, form or order.’<sup>7</sup> After nearly a millennium, Aquinas developed PTE in accordance to the Aristotelian metaphysics: ‘And so I say that evil is not an entity, but the subject that evil befalls is, since evil is only the privation of a particular good. For example, blindness itself is not an entity, but the subject that blindness befalls is.’<sup>8</sup>

In this article, I try to offer a critical re-reading of PTE as has been understood and discussed by some Muslim philosophers. To be clear, I do not take Muslim philosophers as a *homogeneous* group – undoubtedly, they have significant differences regarding their philosophical methodologies, approaches, and standpoints. In this article, whenever I use the term ‘Muslim philosophers’ I merely refer to those major Islamic philosophers who have dealt with PTE in a notably way and adopted a clear stance on it, either positive or negative. The article has three main parts. First, I introduce PTE and its conceptual framework. Then, I explain and examine its grounds. Finally, I discuss the objections against PTE and evaluate the proposed replies. Though my focus is on the Muslim philosophers’ views, I occasionally discuss the relevant debate among the contemporary philosophers of religion.

Here, it should be pointed out that my approach in this article is philosophical instead of historical in the sense that is typically adopted by the so-called intellectual historians or historians of ideas. My objective is, then, to interpret, examine, and evaluate PTE from a philosophical perspective. Consequently, I find myself entitled to utilize current ideas including modern scientific achievements in my discussion.

## The nature of evil

As the first step towards disclosing the nature of evil, Muslim philosophers engage in a conceptual analysis of 'evil'. Regarding the opposition between 'evil' and 'good', they define the former with respect to the latter. In this perspective, good is that which is *universally desirable*.<sup>9</sup> Since, it is claimed, existence is what is desired by everything, this definition amounts to the view that good and existence are coextensive. In other words, every existent (or being),<sup>10</sup> as existent, is good and vice versa. Furthermore, metaphysical perfection in its turn is equal to existence and goodness. Avicenna (980–1027) clearly expresses what we may call the 'identity relation' between existence, goodness, and perfection in this way: 'The good, in general, is that which everything desires, and that which everything desires is existence or the perfection of existence in the category of existence . . . Thus, what in reality is being desired is existence. Existence is thus a pure good and a pure perfection' (Avicenna (2005), 28). The outcome of this analysis is that evil must be equal to non-existence and privation.<sup>11</sup> One may make a distinction between two senses of evil: the broad and the narrow sense. Evil, in its broad sense, encompasses all kinds of imperfection. This sense of evil can be found in all beings except God. As it is known, in the view of Muslim philosophers, God is the unique necessary being and thus possesses absolute perfection. Since all other existents (i.e. His creatures) are contingent beings, they necessarily lack some kinds of perfection and therefore possess evil aspects. Therefore, the non-existence or privation of any sort of perfection is seen as evil in its broad sense.<sup>12</sup> According to this view, even immaterial intellects and celestial bodies are not entirely good. By contrast, in its narrow sense, evil consists in the non-existence of an essence (*dhāt*) or privation of a kind of perfection. According to this definition, for example, the annihilation of a human person or his lacking a bodily faculty like sight would be seen as evil. It is worth noting that, though evil in its both senses has a negative nature, this is only the second sense of evil that is at stake in the usual discourse of the so-called 'problem of evil'<sup>13</sup> and will be dealt with in the rest of this article.

The definition so far provided for evil seems to need some more clarification. First, one may wonder whether privation of all conceivable perfections of a being would count as evil for it. For example, though lacking wings is a privation of the perfection of being capable of flying, it would just be evil with respect to a bird and not to a man. Thus, a modification seems necessary. In the relevant works, we may find different expressions of such a modification. Avicenna says that evil is the privation of only those kinds of perfections that are required by the nature of a thing – 'natural perfections',<sup>14</sup> we may say. One criterion of being a natural perfection is to belong *permanently* to the species of that thing: 'Thus, evil in essence is privation, though not any [type] of privation but only privation of that to which the nature of the thing necessarily leads in terms of the perfections that belong permanently to its species and nature' (Avicenna (2005), 340). Elsewhere Avicenna elaborates more on this criterion. Perfections are of two types: The first type is a necessary perfection or a beneficial one close to necessary. Regarding human beings, for instance, this type embraces what is demanded by human individuals as long as they are human beings or have a soul. The second type, however, is the perfection that is accessible just to the minority of the individuals of a species as something that takes place after the secondary perfections. The privation of this second type 'is not an evil according to species but with respect to a consideration above and beyond what is a necessary requirement for the species'. In other words, this type 'is not one of the things toward which a thing is impelled in preserving the nature of the species in the [same] manner in which it is impelled toward its secondary perfections that succeed the primary perfections. If it did not exist, it would have been a privation of something that is [not] entailed in the nature [of things].' Knowledge of philosophy, geometry, and the like are

examples of the second type.<sup>15</sup> According to this distinction, we should notice that only privation of the first type could count as evil (in the sense under discussion).

Second, one may argue that we observe *beings* that undoubtedly are evil. For instance, one cannot reasonably deny that the fire that burns our skin and causes severe pain is itself evil. Also, a murderer and the means of murder (a gun, for instance) should be taken as evil. In these cases, the involved evil (fire, murderer, and gun) is the existence of a real being and not mere non-existence or privation. Thus, the above definition of evil is not acceptable.

To respond to this possible objection an important distinction between *essential* evil and *accidental* evil is drawn. The essential evil, or evil in its primary sense, is nothing but the privation of existence and perfection. Thus, existence, *qua existence*, is essentially good. Nevertheless, on some occasions, it happens that a being (which is essentially good) brings about a type of privation. In these cases, this being could be called 'evil' inasmuch as it is responsible for the reality of an essential evil. In other words, it is evil just in the secondary sense – an accidental evil. According to this distinction, beings like a fire, a murderer, and a gun could be occasionally called 'evil' in a secondary sense, that is, regarding that they bring about an essential evil like injury and death as the privation of health and life respectively.

Since the accidental evil consists in a being that is considered evil as far as it has, as it were, a causal relation to an essential evil, it is called 'relative evil' (*al-Shar bi al-qiyās*) too.

All beings are good either absolutely, i.e. both essentially and accidentally, or only essentially but in relation to another thing it happens to become the cause of its non-existence or annihilation of one of its qualities, and this latter is called 'accidental evil', i.e. what brings about the non-existence of another being or hinders a thing from having what it deserves, or negates the opposite perfection and good. (Mullā Ṣadrā (1981), 61; my translation)

Having this distinction in mind, Muslim philosophers like Avicenna and Mullā Ṣadrā (1572–1640) believe that God and other incorporeal beings are absolute goods while all the corporeal beings, though essentially good, are possibly subject to become, in one way or another, an accidental evil.<sup>16</sup>

Considering the above-mentioned remarks and distinctions, a more accurate expression of PTE can be offered:

PTE: *All essential evils consist in either non-existence (of a being) or privation (of a deserved) perfection.*

### The grounds of PTE

Muslim philosophers and logicians habitually distinguish between self-evident (*badīhī* or *ḍarūrī*) and derivative (*naẓarī*) statements. To express this distinction with the contemporary terminology, we may say that one's belief in a self-evident statement does not need for its justification to any arguments – it is self-justified. On the other hand, to be justified, one's belief in a derivative statement must be grounded in at least one sound argument.<sup>17</sup>

Bearing this distinction in mind, it should be investigated whether PTE contains a self-evident or a derivative statement, and in the latter case, whether there is any sound argument for its truth.

### PTE's being self-evident

Some Muslim philosophers apparently maintain that PTE contains a self-evident statement. For example, Mīr Dāmād (1543–1631) writes:

Is this [statement] not one of the evident and primordial statements that good is what everything desires and aspires to, and completes with it the proportion of its perfection in its rank and level of existence? . . . Therefore, evil is not an entity, but the lack of an entity, or the lack of its perfection, or the imperfection of what an entity has. And where there is neither a lack of an entity nor the lack of a perfection desired by an entity, then one who is on the natural intellect (*jibillat al-aql*) and the instinct of humanity (*fiṭrat al-Insānīyyah*), does not think that there are any entities as evil at all. Thus, all existence is good, and all evil is non-existence. (Mīr Dāmād (1374), 428; my translation)<sup>18</sup>

Regarding this claim, an initial objection may be raised: if PTE is self-evident, then why do many people, including some philosophers and theologians, not accept it? The answer is that P's being self-evident does not entail a global consensus on P's truth. Indeed, many people may reject a self-evident statement due to certain epistemic or even psychological reasons.<sup>19</sup> Lāhijī (d. 1662) apparently alludes to this answer when he remarks: 'And this premise [namely, that existence is absolute good] is really self-evident. And the possible obscurity in it stems from the failure of recognition of the very essence of the good and the evil' (Lāhijī (1425), 227). How can we assess the claim of PTE's being self-evident? Muslim logicians typically divide self-evident statements into different types. For example, in his classification of the statements deployed as the premises of a syllogism, Avicenna refers to a type of statements as 'statements that must be accepted' (*al-wājib qabūluhā*).<sup>20</sup> That is, the human intellect has no choice but to accept the truth of them. These statements are divided into six types: (i) primary statements (*awwalīyyāt*), (ii) observational statements (*mushāhadāt*), (iii) experiential statements (*mujarrabāt*),<sup>21</sup> (iv) intuited statements (*ḥadsīyyāt*), (v) statements based on transmitted unanimous accounts (*mutawātirāt*),<sup>22</sup> and (vi) statements containing their syllogisms (*qaḍāyā qīyāsātuhā ma'ahā*).<sup>23</sup>

A short survey of the definitions and examples of these divisions of self-evident statement<sup>24</sup> may suffice to conclude that PTE could with great difficulty be subsumed under one of them. It is rather obvious that our conceiving the contained subject (essential evil) and predicate (is non-existence or privation) does not entail our assent to PTE. Moreover, it seems even more obvious that PTE is neither an observational nor an experiential proposition. The case seems quite similar regarding the latter types: one cannot find a strong intuition (*ḥads*) or a great number of testimonies in favour of PTE. In addition, there is no intermediary and relevant syllogism initially *present* to the mind which can establish the truth of PTE.<sup>25</sup>

### Inductive argument

Another way for establishing PTE's truth is to analyse some cases of what is commonly called 'evil' into the constituent elements and show that their evilness ultimately refers to a kind of privation. To give an example, murder as a moral evil involves diverse constituents some of which have an existential nature and, as such, are not evil. For instance, the murderer's power to perform certain actions, the capacity of the murder weapon to shoot the bullet, and the features of the victim's body which make it possible for the bullet to enter it are all good insofar as they are perfections. The only element that renders murder evil is the victim's death, which is nothing but the privation of the perfection of life. The same goes for natural evils. An earthquake is evil only to the extent that it involves (albeit, not necessarily) the loss of human lives and properties.<sup>26</sup>

Assuming the plausibility of such analyses, can they provide an inductive argument for the truth of PTE? It seems quite obvious that these occasional analyses fall short of

providing an inductive argument for PTE as a universal proposition as long as one fails to investigate *all* types of evil. At most, they can furnish us with an incomplete induction which, according to Muslim philosophers' view, fails to bring about certainty.<sup>27</sup> In short, the achievement of this sort of analysis could be nothing more than answering 'the counterexamples and clarifying the distinction between essential and accidental evils and abolishing the confusion between these two'.<sup>28</sup>

### Al-Rāzī's objection

In his commentary on *al-Ishārāt wa al-Tanbihāt (Remarks and Admonitions)*, Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (1149–1209) criticizes (Muslim) philosophers' concepts of good and evil. Al-Rāzī holds that these philosophers, including Avicenna, first claim that evil is non-existence and then adduce an argument based on their analysis of some *examples* of evil. Al-Rāzī's criticism may be summarized as follows.

The statement 'evil is non-existence' can be construed either as a definition for 'evil' or as a proposition that predicates non-existence of evil. Both interpretations, however, are problematic. In the first interpretation, 'evil is non-existence' is a mere stipulative definition and as such it does not require any arguments for everyone is free to interpret each term with each meaning. (Thus, Muslim philosophers' argumentation will be useless.) In the second interpretation, to acknowledge the proposition, one must grasp the concept of its subject, namely, 'evil', while this concept is open to dispute. Putting this dilemma aside, their argument is founded on some examples and thus cannot lead to certainty.<sup>29</sup>

Al-Ṭūsī's brief response to the above objections is that what Muslim philosophers do is to investigate the essence of what is usually called 'evil' by the laymen and to separate its essential features from its accidental ones so that this essence will be entirely distinguished from others. And it is clear that this type of investigation is legitimate and justified. Furthermore, the involved argument is not an analogical (*tamthīlī*) argument. Instead, it is based on the knowledge of the different uses of the term 'evil' and the only way to gain this knowledge is through induction.<sup>30</sup>

Inspired by al-Ṭūsī's response one may add that undoubtedly Muslim philosophers do not intend to provide a mere stipulative and arbitrary definition for evil. Instead, they seek to find a philosophical definition that discloses the common nature or reality (*ḥaqīqah*) of evils. To accomplish this objective, they use a commonsensical concept of evil as a starting point and then go further through an accurate examination and analysis of certain obvious examples of evil (such as disease and murder) to discover the common nature shared by all of them.

After all, as was mentioned above and echoed in al-Ṭūsī's statement, this procedure should not be taken as an (inductive) argument for the claim that evil is non-existence.

### Deductive argument

The third way for supporting PTE, which seems to be the main one, is to furnish a deductive argument. Mullā Ṣadrā, among others, presents an argument in the form of *reductio ad absurdum*.<sup>31</sup> This argument can be formulated as follows:

1. If a being *A* is essentially evil, then it would be evil either for itself or for another being *B*.
2. If *A* is evil for itself, then *A* either brings about its own non-existence (i.e. annihilates itself) or the privation of some of its own perfections.
3. But *A* cannot bring about its own non-existence since this assumption leads to the non-existence of *A*, while we assumed that *A* is an existent.<sup>32</sup>

4. A cannot bring about the privation of some of its perfections since nothing requires the privation of its perfection. Moreover, if something brings about the privation of some of its perfection, then (our reason judges that) the essential evil is but that assumed privation which is in fact non-existence.
5. If A is evil for B, then A either brings about B's non-existence or the privation of some of B's perfections or neither of these two.
6. If A brings about B's non-existence or the privation of some of B's perfections, then the essential evil involved is B's non-existence or privation (which, by its nature, is non-existence and privation)
7. If A neither brings about B's non-existence nor entails B's privation, then there would be no reason for A's being evil.

As we see, according to this argument, all possible implications of the assumption that an existent is essentially evil either lead to a kind of absurdity or require the consequence that the essential evil is non-existence and privation (the opposite of our initial assumption reflected in premise 1). Thus, we are presumably entitled to conclude the negation of our initial assumption – that no existent is an essential evil. This conclusion is equivalent to PTE. Mullā Ṣadrā summarizes his argument in this way: 'If evil were an existential entity, then evil would not be evil. The consequent is false [for it is contradictory]. Thus, the antecedent is false too'.<sup>33</sup>

One may object that this argument commits the fallacy of *petitio principii* (or begging the question). For example, in premise 2, the assumption that A is evil for itself is confined to two possibilities: bringing about its non-existence and annihilating some of its perfections. Yet, it seems that this confinement presupposes PTE. This point becomes more obvious when we take a closer look at premises 5 and 7. In premise 7, for example, it is said that if A does not bring about B's non-existence or privation, then there is no reason to consider A as an evil for B. This claim apparently presupposes that B's (essential) evilness is confined just in its non-existence or privation while this presupposition is nothing but PTE itself. If this is true, then this deductive argument fails to demonstrate PTE.

Here, it seems useful to have a short examination of the arguments proposed in the mediaeval Christian philosophy to find how cogent they are. As we know, Augustine and Aquinas are two prominent adherents of PTE during the Middle Ages. In 'Evil and Privation' Anglin and Goetz have 'gleaned' three arguments from Augustine's works. The first argument goes as follows:

Nothing is evil unless it is destroying (or corrupting) something.  
 Thus, it is not possible that something evil not be destroying something.  
 If there were something inherently evil it could exist apart from other things,  
 destroying neither them nor itself.  
 Thus, there cannot be anything inherently evil.  
 Thus, evil is just privation. (Anglin and Goetz (1982), 10)

This argument does not appear to be sound. The first premise, as a universal claim, seems groundless. Perhaps, we agree that *some* evils (like earthquakes and murders) are evils inasmuch as they destroy or corrupt something else. Yet, there is no good reason for believing that *all* evils are so unless we presuppose the truth of PTE. However, this presupposition leads to the commitment of *petitio principii*. Furthermore, the second premise is just a modal version of the first and thus asserts the dubious claim of the first premise in a stronger mode.

Up to now, we may conclude that there has not been proposed any conclusive philosophical argument for PTE<sup>34</sup> – though *some* significant kinds of evil undoubtedly are in essence privational and negative, there is no good reason to believe that all of them are so.

### The problem of indetermination

One may rightly expect the adherents of PTE to determine the type of privation involved in each case of essential evils. This seems, however, not to be an easy task. There are some evils whose opposite goods one cannot straightforwardly recognize. In such cases, we are usually offered several alternatives for what the correspondent good could be without any available *criterion* for preferring one for the others. We may call this problem ‘the problem of indetermination’.

As we already saw, those Muslim philosophers who support PTE usually explore different types of essential evils to show that they are indeed nothing but the privations of certain goods. However, they seemingly do not take the problem of indetermination so seriously. The reason for this position, in my view, is that in advance they believe in the equation of good with existence and consequently the equation of evil with non-existence. Thus, in any case of evil, presumably, there must be a handy way for determining the opposite good – to seek for a kind of possible existence or deserved perfection that is actually absent in that case.

This strategy, however, does not seemingly work in all cases, especially when we come across accidental evils. As we shall see, moral evils are typically seen by Muslim philosophers as accidental evils. We remember that an accidental evil is a being that, in one way or another, brings about an essential evil. Therefore, in the case of each accidental evil, we should be ready to determine three things: a being (= an accidental evil) that causes a kind of privation (= an essential evil) of a perfection or existence (= an opposite essential good). Thus, in each case of moral evil, we must determine the good whose opposite is brought about by an immoral action like injustice and adultery or a certain vice such as jealousy and selfishness. Nonetheless, one may fail to exclusively determine such a good. For example, in the case of injustice, sometimes we are told that the opposite good is the perfection of the oppressed person or the perfection of the oppressor’s intellectual soul and sometimes the civil policy is identified as the opposite good. Regarding adultery, to give another example, the opposite good according to some Muslim philosophers is the bodily order and according to some others is the religious rule. Moreover, according to one view, moral vices are evil as far as they cause immoral actions and according to another view, they are evil insofar as they hinder us from achieving our intellectual perfection.<sup>35</sup> Overall, it seems that there is not an exact criterion for determining the opposite goods of the essential evils. Instead, they are identified in an *ad hoc* way.

It seems that the contemporary advocates of PTE too do not grapple with the problem of indetermination for they are ready to propose diverse parallel interpretations of the opposite goods. In a general articulation of PTE, for example, it is sometimes said that ‘[a]ccording to the privation theory, evil has no positive existence: evil consists in a lack of substance, being or goodness’.<sup>36</sup> However, one fails to find any further explication regarding the difference between ‘substance’, ‘being’, and ‘goodness’. In another exposition, something is evil provided that ‘it lacks something it ought to have’<sup>37</sup> or ‘the absence of a good – a property or a quality – that normally would or should be present in a thing’.<sup>38</sup> This diversity becomes much more explicit with moral evils. Following Aquinas, one may view moral evil as ‘the human will’s lack of being subordinate to God’.<sup>39</sup> According to another view, moral evil is the privative absence of the *right* to



have a specific motive or to perform a specific action.<sup>40</sup> There are still other interpretations such as the ‘nonfulfillment of a duty’ or the ‘psychic disharmony’.<sup>41</sup>

In response to this problem, one may effortlessly adopt a sceptical position and argue that this problem stems from the limitation of our knowledge. Since we have rational grounds for the belief that all essential evils are the privation of certain goods, the problem of indetermination at most indicates the weakness and limitation of our cognitive faculties to identify the opposite good involved in each case of evil. This position seems very similar to the position of sceptical theists towards the problem of pointless evil.

## Counterexamples

PTE as a universal claim could be, and actually has been, subject to counterexamples. Pain and moral evil construct two major counterexamples. In this section I will discuss these two counterexamples respectively.

### Pain

Undoubtedly, pain is one of the most problematic phenomena in the human life to the extent that although divergent philosophical and scientific accounts of its nature have been proposed, none seems even relatively satisfactory.<sup>42</sup> However, most people (perhaps all who believe in the reality of evil in this world) share the view that pain is evil. If one supposes that pain is evil and of positive (non-privational) nature, then one may find a *prima facie* counterexample to PTE.

Before exploring the Muslim philosophers’ position towards this probable counterexample, we should take a short look at their view on the very nature of pain. Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī argues that the notion of ‘pain’ (*ʿalam*) is self-evident to the extent that it does not need any definitions. The summary of his argument is that the proposition *I am in pain* is a sensible self-evident proposition and all notions involved in a self-evident proposition are self-evident. Thus, pain is a self-evident notion. However, most Muslim philosophers take this notion as definable. According to a rough definition, pain consists in ‘one’s *apprehension* of what is disagreeable to one’s nature (constitution)’. The obvious implication of this definition, which looks essential for our discussion, is that pain is a kind of apprehension or knowledge (in its broad sense).<sup>43</sup> Now, assuming that apprehension or knowledge has a non-privational nature, pain, as an (essential) evil, has a non-privational nature and thus counts as a counterexample to PTE.

Fakhr al-Rāzī is most probably the first Muslim philosopher to allude to this problem.<sup>44</sup> Afterwards, Mullā Jalāl al-Dīn Dawānī (1426/7–1502) articulated the problem in the form of an argument. Following the rather prominent view among the medieval Muslim philosophers, he believes that the general cause of (sensory) pains is the discontinuity<sup>45</sup> (*tafaruq*) in one’s bodily organ. Regarding sensory (bodily) pains, he then distinguishes between two types of evil: (i) the discontinuity as a privation of a perfection (namely, the quality of continuity) and (ii) the pain itself as an apprehension which has positive nature. To show the plausibility of this distinction, he assumes a case in which discontinuity occurs without feeling pain. In this case, just the first evil takes place. Dawānī concludes that pain, as such, is evil and as a type of apprehension, has a positive nature. Therefore, pain counts as a counterexample to PTE.<sup>46</sup>

We may formulate Dawānī’s argument as follows

1. Pain is evil.
2. Pain is an essential evil, not an accidental evil.
3. Pain is a kind of apprehension.

4. All kinds of apprehension are existential (non-privational) entities.
5. Pain is an existential entity. [from (3) and (4)]

Conclusion: There are essential evils that are existential entities. [from (2) and (5)]  
This conclusion, however, contradicts PTE, and therefore, pain disproves PTE.

The adherents of PTE have proposed two types of responses to this argument. The first response is to reject the second premise and argue that pain is not an essential evil. Al-Ṭusī seemingly adopts this response when he writes:

And the case is similar with the pains since they are not evils inasmuch as they are apprehensions of things or in terms of the existence of these things in themselves or their coming into existence by their causes. Yet, they are evils just in relation to the person who feels pain and lacks the continuity/connectedness of an organ that deserves continuity/connectedness. (Avicenna (1404), 331)<sup>47</sup>

In this passage, al-Ṭusī distinguishes between four aspects:

1. Pain's being a kind of apprehension.
2. The existence of the things apprehended.
3. Their coming into existence by their causes.
4. Pain's relation to the sufferer so far as s/he lacks deserved perfection.

Al-Ṭusī's claim, then, is that pain is evil just with regard to the sufferer's lack of perfection (i.e. the connectedness of his/her organ). Consequently, regarding its relation to a privation, pain is nothing more than an accidental evil.

The second response is to disagree with the fourth premise as a universal statement and argue that some kinds of apprehension are privational. Mullā Ṣadrā, for example, puts forward a rather complicated argument to show that pain, though it is a kind of apprehension, is privation. The notion of 'knowledge by presence' plays a vital role in this argument. Following Suhrawardī (1154–1191) Muslim philosophers were able to understand the significance of the dichotomy between two types of knowledge: 'knowledge by presence' (*al-ʿilm al-ḥuḍūrī*) and 'conceptual (acquired) knowledge' (*al-ʿilm al-ḥusūlī*). Roughly speaking, the former consists in the direct knowledge of the object (without any intermediation of concepts) based on its metaphysical presence before the knower. The human soul's knowledge of itself and its mental states is seen as a clear example of knowledge by presence. Another example is the bilateral knowledge between the (efficient) cause and its effect. According to Muslim philosophers, infallibility is one of the main features of this kind of knowledge.<sup>48</sup>

Mullā Ṣadrā's argument can be formulated as follows:

1. Pain, as a kind of apprehension, consists in 'knowledge by presence' and not of acquired knowledge.
2. In the case of knowledge by presence, the apprehension is identical to the realization of what is apprehended.
3. Pain is identical to the realization of what is apprehended (disconnectedness, for example).
4. In the case of pain, the essence of what is apprehended is privational.
5. The realization of a thing is identical to its essence.
6. In the case of pain, the realization of what is apprehended is privational.
7. Pain is identical to what is privational.

The conclusion, thus, is that pain as an essential evil is one of the instances of non-existence (Mullā Ṣadrā (1981), 63–66).

The summary of Mullā Ṣadrā's view, according to the above argument, is that although pain is an essential evil, it has a privational nature, and thus should not count as a counterexample to PTE.<sup>49</sup>

Mullā Ṣadrā's view has been criticized by some of his successors. For example, Mullā Hādī Sabzewārī (1797–1873) in his commentary on *al-Asfār* claims that in the case of pain in addition to the privational apprehended entity, there exists an internal positive state that is grasped by the sufferer, and the reality of pain consists in the apprehension of this painful state. According to him, the fact that confirms this claim is that some pains (for example, those that stem from the death of the relatives) do not involve any kinds of privation, and nevertheless, the subject suffers due to the apprehension of that internal painful state.

Sabzewārī's own view is that if we maintain that pain has a positive nature, then it is just an accidental evil so far as it is not agreeable to the sufferer and makes an unpleasant impression.<sup>50</sup>

Ṭabāṭabāʿee (1903–1981) makes two objections to Mullā Ṣadrā's view. First, given the truth of this view, it is limited to sensory (bodily) pains and does not embrace mental pains and sufferings such as what one feels after being aware of the death of some relatives. In the latter case, pain does not involve knowledge by presence of a privation.<sup>51</sup> Second, the apprehension involved in pain is a type of *fallible* sensory perception and thus, it is too far from being an item of *infallible* 'knowledge by presence'. He then concludes that the apprehension involved in a case of feeling pain inasmuch as it has an existential nature is not itself pain or evil. However, this apprehension is evil and pain inasmuch as it is identical with the privational apprehended entity.<sup>52</sup>

Regarding the above debate, it appears that the more accepted view among Muslim philosophers is that pain is just an *accidental* evil – it is not evil in itself but as far as it has a relation to a certain privation as an essential evil. Thus, though of a positive nature, pain cannot count as a counterexample to PTE.

Contemporary philosophers of religion, too, are engaged in the challenge of pain. G. Stanley Kane, for instance, distinguishes between 'a limb which merely lacks feeling' and 'one which is racked with pain'. He then argues that the latter, unlike the former, cannot be adequately described as mere privation of good health. Instead, there is something positive present in the person's experience (in the second case).<sup>53</sup> In response to Kane, three explanations are proposed to show that pain, as an experienced quality, is not evil: (i) pain is 'part of a warning system without which our bodies would very easily be destroyed'; (ii) the Augustinian view 'that the experience quality of pain is a manifestation of a system of reward and punishment whereby justice is done'; (iii) pain 'is a component of a system whereby we acquire scientific or moral knowledge'.<sup>54</sup>

This response looks implausible. First, I believe that none of these three explanations apply to all cases of pain. There are, undoubtedly, pains without any warning functions (e.g. the pain that continues after the patient's awareness of their illness or the pain after undergoing a minor successful surgery). Moreover, many pains, like those felt by the righteous people or the infants, cannot reasonably count as punishment. Similarly, one can easily find certain pains that are ineffective in gaining scientific or moral knowledge.

Second, as Calder puts forward, the response seemingly is based on a confusion between the intrinsic and the instrumental value of pain. The positive instrumental value of pain does not require its positive intrinsic value – pain can be an intrinsic evil even though it is instrumentally good.<sup>55</sup> I believe that this objection can undermine both the first and the third explanations.

### Moral evils

Moral evils can be initially considered as counterexamples to PTE. Muslim philosophers usually divide moral evils into immoral behaviours (such as murder) and their principles within the human souls as vices (such as greed). It might be claimed that the two kinds of moral evils are of positive nature, and thus, as far as they are evils, they contradict PTE.

What is the Muslim philosophers' response to this problem? It seems that appealing to the essential/accidental evil dichotomy, they have a handy and straightforward solution: the moral evils that presumably have positive nature are not essential but accidental evils. To elaborate on this point, Muslim philosophers used to analyse some instances of moral evils. Murder, as an action, is essentially good inasmuch as it is a perfection of 'the animal and natural faculties' of the murderer. Yet, it is accidentally evil in relation to the faculty of human intellect whose perfection is to control other inferior human faculties. The same can be said about moral vices like fear and selfishness. On this analysis, it is claimed that all moral evils are at most accidental evils and thus, they never contradict PTE as long as it is limited to essential evils. Avicenna expresses this position in a telling fashion:

Evil in acts is also [evil] in relation to the one who loses his perfection by its reaching him, as with injustice, or in relation to a perfection necessary in the religious regime, as [when] adultery [takes place]. Similarly, moral dispositions are only evil by virtue [of such acts] proceeding from them. And they are connected with depriving the soul of perfection that ought to belong to it. (Avicenna (2005), 343)

The challenge of moral evils is still at stake in a somehow different way. Stanley Kane, for instance, argues that according to PTE, the sin of omission and the sin of commission must be equally evil since both are evil insofar as they consist in the lack of love and right action. This consequence, however, is absurd for undoubtedly the latter is a greater evil than the former.<sup>56</sup> Since PTE cannot account for the fact that some moral evils are greater than some others, PTE must be rejected.

In response, Anglin and Goetz contend that PTE can explain the difference between these two types of evil. The sin of commission is a greater evil than the sin of omission insofar as 'the former involves a greater deviation of the will from the dictates of conscience and thus a greater lack of psychic harmony'.<sup>57</sup>

Here, I do not have space to assess the current debate on pain and moral evil as counterexamples to PTE. Yet, let me just refer to what I find vital for having a more profound and fruitful discussion. As a matter of fact, in many issues, philosophy of religion needs to consider the achievements of other branches of philosophy as well as diverse scientific disciplines. Regarding the present issue, philosophers of religion should pay serious attention to the relevant issues in other philosophical fields such as philosophy of mind, philosophy of perception, and ethics as long as they contain more comprehensive perspectives on the nature of pain and moral evil.

### Conclusion

Most Muslim philosophers endorse the privation theory of evil (PTE). Having the distinction between essential and accidental evil in mind, PTE says that all *essential* evils consist in either non-existence (of a being) or privation (of a deserved) perfection. In order to provide a rational ground for PTE, some of them claim that it is self-evident. This claim, however, could hardly be supported by their logical point of view on the nature and divisions of self-evident statements. Others examine some typical (moral and natural) evils to show that their evilness ultimately consists in certain privational aspects. Though

occasionally successful, this effort falls short of playing the role of a valid inductive argument. A third way adopted by some philosophers like Mullā Ṣadrā is to articulate a deductive argument. Yet, this argument seems not conclusive since it apparently commits the fallacy of *petitio principii*.

As a universal statement, PTE faces some problems. The problem of indetermination stems from the absence of a clear and efficient criterion for determining the opposite good in every instance of evil. Furthermore, PTE faces two types of initially compelling counterexamples – pain and moral evils. Some Muslim philosophers like Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī and Dawānī raise the objection that pain as a certain evil invalidates PTE. For, being a kind of apprehension, pain has a positive (non-privational) nature. In response to this objection, some Muslim philosophers reject the claim that pain is an essential evil and some others set arguments to show that, though a kind of apprehension, pain has a privational nature. The challenge of moral evil is responded to by appealing to the fact that all moral evils, including immoral actions and evil vices, are accidental evils.

Two ending remarks: first, the above-mentioned objections to PTE, if successful, at most reject PTE as a *universal* statement. Thus, one who supports these objections can reasonably maintain that *some* (or even many) essential evils are of privational and negative nature. Second, Regarding the role and status of PTE in Muslim philosophers' theodicy, PTE's falsehood does not undermine the whole structure of this theodicy. Even if some evils are non-privational, this theodicy seems to have the capacity to present a plausible answer to the question 'why and how does God, as the absolutely perfect Being, permit evils?'

## Notes

1. For example, the title of the relevant chapter in Avicenna's *The Healing* is: 'On providence, showing the manner of the entry of evil in divine predetermination' (Avicenna (2005), 339). See also Mullā Ṣadrā (1981), 55.
2. Shams Inati analyses what she calls 'Ibn Sina's theodicy' into seven theses. See Inati (2017), ch. 6.
3. In the current literature on the privation theory of evil, as far as I can see, the notion of 'privation' is usually used to refer to the absence both of a being and of its perfections. As we shall see, however, Muslim philosophers emphasize the distinction between these two types of absence. Thus, in my reference to this theory, wherever I use both terms 'non-existence' and 'privation', they refer to these two kinds of absence respectively. And wherever I use 'privation' alone, I intend both of them.
4. Mīr Dāmād (1374), 434.
5. For a new discussion of Plotinus' view on PTE, see Opsomer (2022).
6. Augustine (1999), 44.
7. Augustine (1953), 327.
8. Aquinas (2003), 59.
9. It seems that Aristotle was the first to make a link between goodness and desirability. He thought that the highest good, or the Good, is desirable for itself and not for the sake of some other goods while all other goods are desirable for its sake. The metaphysical principle of the identity of good and existence, however, may be counted as the innovation of Muslim philosophers such as Avicenna.
10. In this article, I use 'existent' and 'being' interchangeably.
11. If 'all existence is identical to good' is true, then 'all non-existence is identical to what is not good (i.e., evil)' will be true.
12. This broad sense of 'evil' seems quite similar, if not identical, to what nowadays is meant by 'metaphysical evil' as was first used by Leibniz in his *Theodicy*: 'metaphysical evil consists in mere imperfection' (Leibniz (1985), 139).
13. Though Avicenna does not explicitly distinguish between these two senses, it seems that he deals with the first sense of evil in book 8, chapter 6 of the metaphysics of the *Healing* where he writes:

That whose existence in itself is [only] possible is not a pure good, because existence for it itself is not necessary through itself. Its essence, hence, bears the possibility of nonexistence; and that which in some respect bears the possibility of nonexistence is not in all respects devoid of evil and deficiency. Hence pure good is only that whose existence is necessary in itself. (Avicenna (2005), 284)

As it is clear, here 'evil' is used in its broad sense so that it embraces all beings except God. In book 9 chapter 6, however, he apparently discusses the second sense of evil since he tells us that '[a]ll cause of evil is found only within the sublunar sphere' (*ibid.*, 341).

14. Inati translates the Arabic expression 'الكاملات التابعة' in Avicenna's text to 'fixed perfections' and presents a detailed exposition of its status in Avicenna's view (Inati (2017), 68–70). As I quoted in this article, however, Marmura translates it to 'perfections that belong permanently to its species and nature'.

15. Avicenna (2005), 342.

16. Using their cosmological terminology, one may say that all and only the beings within the sublunar sphere (i.e. corporeal beings) could become accidental evils: 'All cause of evil is found only within the sublunar sphere' (Avicenna (2005), 341).

17. This distinction is usually set forth in the Muslim logicians' works and utilized in the philosophical discourse.

18. Mullā Ṣadrā puts this claim in another way: 'There is no doubt that existence is, in itself, good and glory and non-existence is, in itself, evil. And this is the judgment of the primordial nature' (Mullā Ṣadrā (1990), 121). See also Al-Zinūzī (1376), 478).

19. One main reason could be that the concepts involved in the statement are not conceived clearly and in the right manner. Avicenna divides primary statements into '[i] those which are evident to all, because [their] terms are conceived clearly; and [ii] those [whose evidence] may be concealed, and need reflection on the concealed aspect of the concept of their terms. For if the concept is confused, the assent too is confused' (Avicenna (1984), 120).

20. This type of statement is what has been called by Avicenna's successors 'self-evident' (*badīhi*). For example, Al-Ṭūsī declares that the self-evident statements are 'primary statements, experiential statements and the like, and these are called axioms (*al-uṣūl al-muta'arifah*) and statements that must be accepted (*al-wājib qabūluhā*) (Al-Ṭūsī (1361), 395).

21. Ahmed's translation: 'the objects of experience' (Avicenna (2011), 88).

22. Ahmed's translation: 'what is universally circulated' (*ibid.*, 89).

23. Avicenna (1984), 119.

24. For a more detailed discussion of this classification see Black (2013), sections 3–4.

25. As many Muslim logicians after Avicenna have rightly spelled out, what is 'self-evident' among these six types is nothing but the first one, namely the primary statement, and the remaining five types need for their justification a sort of argumentation. For example, after presenting the definitions of these six types, al-Ḥillī writes:

[A]nd these four types (namely, the third, fourth, fifth and sixth type) are not among the principles [of demonstration] for they are dependent on intermediaries and they are not universal as the rational thinkers do not agree over them. And the primary statements are the only reliable [principle of demonstration] since the sensible statements are also uncommon among the rational thinkers. (Al-Ḥillī (1371), 202)

26. For other examples see Al-Ḥillī (1417), 42, Mīr Dāmād (1374), 432, and Mullā Ṣadrā (1981), 62.

27. Following Aristotle's definition of induction, Muslim logicians typically define induction as an argument (*hujjah*) in which one starts with observing a property in the different particulars of a universal and infer that the universal, as a universal, has that property too. The inductive inference then is divided into two kinds: the complete induction in which all particulars are examined and the incomplete induction in which only some particulars are examined. In his *Deliverance* Avicenna writes: 'Induction is [the act of passing] a judgment about a universal due to the existence of that judgment for the particulars [that fall under] that universal. [This occurs] either [with regard to] all of them (which is a complete induction (*istiqrā' tāmm*)) or most of them (which is the common induction (*istiqrā' mashhūr*))' (Avicenna (2011), 83). See also Al-Rāzī and Al-Ṭūsī (1404), part 2, 80.

28. Mullā Ṣadrā (1981), 62.

29. For a detailed exposition of this criticism see Shihadeh (2019), 71–72. It is worth noting that in his most important philosophical work *Al-Mabāhith Al-Mashriqiyyah*, al-Rāzī does not mention these objections. Instead, he furnishes us with a theodicy quite similar to that of other philosophers. See Al-Rāzī (1411), vol. 2, 519–525.

30. This picture of the methodology of Muslim philosophers seems very similar to what is nowadays promoted by the proponents of the so-called experimental philosophy.

31. Mullā Ṣadrā (1981), 58–59.

32. According to a principle accepted by Muslim philosophers, it is impossible for an object or entity to bring about its non-existence or privation. Yet, the conversion is true, namely that any object in itself demands the endurance of its existence and perfections. To my knowledge, the reason behind this principle is that if an existent object can cause its non-existence or perfection, then it must cease to exist and become non-existence. This consequence, however, is absurd because the object is presumably existent. Interpreted in this way, the principle

seems highly controversial. If we construe 'bringing about' as causation, then the converse will be unacceptable – it is not the case that any object causes its own existence and perfection. Moreover, one may take the case of suicide as a counterexample that can refute this principle. We may propose, however, an initial response. According to the dualism accepted by most Muslim philosophers, suicide does not consist in annihilation of the real self (soul) but mere cutting off its relation to the body. It is worth noting that even if this principle (and consequently premise 3 of the argument) were refuted, the whole argument could survive – we may say that even if A can bring about its own non-existence, then the essential involved evil would A's non-existence not A as a being.

33. Mullā Ṣadrā (1981), 59. For another less complicated version of this argument, see Suhrawardī (1383), 497.

34. In order to support PTE, some Muslim philosophers have appealed to the Quranic text. For example, the mystic philosopher Feyḍ Kāshānī (1598–1680) refers to the ending part of a verse that declares: 'in Thy hand is the good; Thou art powerful over everything' (chapter 3, verse 26). He argues that since in this verse 'evil' has not been mentioned beside 'good' it connotes that evil is not existent for otherwise it must be among God's creatures and, like other creatures, must be 'in God's hand' and under His power and sovereignty (Feyḍ Kāshānī (1375), 167).

35. See Avicenna (2005), 343–344 and Mullā Ṣadrā (1981), 61–62.

36. Calder (2007), 371.

37. Inspired by Aquinas, Anglin and Goetz write that '[t]he privationist theory of evil is that something is an evil in virtue and only in virtue of the fact that it lacks something it ought to have. In other words, something is an evil insofar as it is defective or deficient' (Anglin and Goetz (1982), 3).

38. Kane (1980), 43.

39. Anglin and Goetz (1982), 4.

40. Ahern (1966), 40–42.

41. Anglin and Goetz (1982), 3.

42. In his comprehensive introduction to *Pain: New Essays on its Nature and the Methodology of its Study*, Murat Aydede explores a wide spectrum of these accounts. In the end, he writes: '[D]espite significant advances in our philosophical and scientific understanding of pain in the last forty years or so, there is still a lot of work to be done to develop a fully satisfactory account of pain'. Aydede (2006), 44.

43. Avicenna, among others, tried to propose a more accurate definition: 'Surely, pleasure is the apprehension of the realization of something which counts perfection for the apprehender inasmuch as it is perfection and good. And pain is the apprehension of the realization of something which is calamity and evil for the apprehender inasmuch as it is so'. (Avicenna (1404), 337).

44. He wrote: 'It is self-evident that pain is an existential entity and, there is no disagreement among wise people about this'. (Al-Rāzī and Al-Ṭūsī (1404), 80).

45. In this context, 'discontinuity' should be understood as a gap or separation within an organ. Bone fracture and abrasions are examples of discontinuity in hard and soft organs respectively. In using 'discontinuity' I am following the English translation of Avicenna's *Canon*. See Avicenna (2013).

46. Dawānī (n.d.) sheet no. 65.

47. Mīr Dāmād, too, accepts this view. See Mīr Dāmād (1374), 331.

48. For a thorough and deep study of knowledge by presence see: Ḥā'irī Yazdī (1992).

49. It is worth noting that in some of his late works, Mullā Ṣadrā outwardly changes his mind and accepts that pain, though it is essentially evil, has positive nature and thus invalidates PTE. See Mullā Ṣadrā (1383), 404.

50. *Ibid.*, 64.

51. Regarding my formulation of Mullā Ṣadrā's argument, this objection rejects the (universality of the) fourth premise and the next objection rejects the first premise.

52. *Ibid.*, 63.

53. Kane (1980), 49.

54. Anglin and Goetz (1982), 6.

55. Calder (2007), 373–374.

56. Kane (1980), 52.

57. Anglin and Goetz (1982), 8. For an objection to this response, see Calder (2007), 374–375.

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