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Why is the world fraught with evil and suffering? (part one)

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By Bachar Bakour

No doubt that 'the problem of evil', or to put it more technically 'Theodicy', is one of the most enduringly acute and pressing problems, be it in theological or philosophical discourse. Why does evil exist? How is it possible for God, the omniscient, the omnipotent and the perfectly good, to allow the existence of evil and suffering in the world? Is evil created by God? If yes, why?

Due to the existence of evil, some have unequivocally questioned some of God's attributes. (1) God is almighty, (2) God is perfectly good, and (3) evil exists. Because of evil, it appears that God wishes to eliminate evil yet is not able to do so, and thus His almightiness is open to question, or that God is able to obliterate evil but does not want to, and therefore His goodness is denied.

The U.S. philosopher William James attempted to solve the problem by denying the almightiness of God.

Alternatively, others have denied the existence of God. A German atheist calls the problem of evil the 'immovable boulder of atheism'. The former atheist, Antony Flew asserts that the problem of evil represents the oft-cited argument for atheism in the western world.

Here is an attempt to clear up the mystery of the matter by means of reconciling the almightiness, goodness and justice of God with the existence of evil and misery in the world on the basis of the Islamic perception.

What is the purpose of life/Why am I here?

Suppose that one evening, as usual, you went to bed, then the next morning you opened your eyes and, to your surprise, found yourself in the kitchen, or more surprisingly, in a nearby park, or to your utter amazement, in a foreign country. Beyond a doubt, your first reaction would be to try to find out how you came there, or who brought you to that place. This is simply the dramatic story of each one of us. Who created me, why was I created, and where am I going after death? Probably, you have not thought of asking yourself these fundamental questions. If you have not yet, it is quite bizarre, because you came to this life at a given time and place without any prior permission being sought from you in regard to three things: the creation process, its timing and locality. Admittedly, you were created with no choice involved on your part. Maybe you are twenty or thirty or sixty years of age, and have yet to ponder the reason for your creation.

My concern here is to focus on the 'Why was I created' question, due to its relevance to the issue at hand. I. The Islamic holistic view of the creation of mankind runs as follows. The notion of man being created with no aim or purpose is patently absurd, and should be banished from one's mind altogether [See the Qur'an. 23:115.] II. The Qur'an expressly states that the main purpose of man's creation is to undergo a life of test in a temporary world. It says: "We created man of a mingled sperm-drop to test him, so We made him hearing, seeing." [the Qur'an. 76:2]; and "It is He who has made you successors of others on the earth and has

raised some of you in rank above others, so that He may try you in what He has given you.” [the Qur’an. 6:165] III. Life and death were created as a means of trial for mankind: “Blessed be He in whose hand is the Kingdom. He is powerful over everything, who created death and life, that He might try which of you is fairest in works; and He is the All-mighty, the All-forgiving.” [the Qur’an. 67:1-2] Elsewhere, the Qur’ān embodies the purpose of creation in the following statement: ‘I have only created the Jinn and mankind to worship me. No provision do I require of them, nor do I require that they should feed Me. Surely God is the All-provider, the Lord of Power, the Ever Mighty’. [the Qur’an. 51:56-58]

It is within the remit of God’s worship that the test of humanity largely exists. And since worship is a broad term, testing manifests itself in various ways, such as faithfully following the Lord’s commands; keeping away from prohibited acts; struggling to lead a life based on goodness, morality, truth and justice; showing great perseverance in the face of difficulty and hardship; and building an ideal society, making use of resources and facilities God installed on earth for your sake. In doing all of that, you are on the right track. This is basically the main function of human beings on earth.

Europe’s Enlightenment has gradually reoriented Western mentality from the meaning in life to Man-centred outlook. Later on, this outlook, theoretically placed in the heart of modern project, has been de-centred and superseded by purely natural and nihilistic-centred outlook. Man has been absorbed in the realm metaphysics, reducible to nature.

Spinoza compared man to a piece of stone thrown by a powerful hand, and as it cruises in space, the poor little stone thinks that it is actually moving of its own free-will. Newton compared the whole world to a perfect machine, a clock that keeps on ticking endlessly and uniformly, without any divine or human intervention.

Erich Maria Remarque, a German novelist wrote, “I am young, I am twenty years old; yet I know nothing of life but despair, death, fear, and fatuous superficiality cast over an abyss of sorrow. I see how peoples are set against one another, and in silence, unknowingly, foolishly, obediently, innocently slay one another. I see that the keenest brains of the world invent weapons and

words to make it yet more refined and enduring. And all men of my age, here and over there, throughout the whole world see these things; all my generation is experiencing these things with me. What would our fathers do if we suddenly stood up and came before them and proffered our account? What do they expect of us if a time ever comes when the war is over? Through the years our business has been killing; — it was our first calling in life. Our knowledge of life is limited to death. What will happen afterwards? And what shall come out of us?” (Erich Maria Remarque, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, 1929).

The Protestant theologian-philosopher Paul Tillich, spoke of the ANXIETY OF MEANINGLESSNESS. He traced it to the modern world’s loss of a spiritual centre which could provide answers to the questions of the meaning of life. Suffering is the result of living without purpose or faith. The knowledge that man was alone caused anxiety because the responsibility for making whatever values there were came entirely from man. Man was free — free to choose without reference to God or an ideal world of essences — but his freedom was a dread freedom, involving crushing responsibility and the eternal threat of non-being.***

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