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Avicenna's Theodicy and al-Rāzī's Anti-Theodicy

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Abstract

Avicenna's Neoplatonic account of divine providence and theodicy was hugely influential on later philosophical and religious thought in the Islamic world. However, it was severely criticised by one of his earlier commentators, the theologian-philosopher Faḥr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1210). While Avicenna champions an optimist theodicean thesis of a plenitude of good to support the theory of providence integrated into his cosmogony, his commentator counters by arguing for a plenitude of evil and an overall pessimist anti-theodicy. Rejecting Avicenna's ontological-cum-cosmological account of evil, al-Rāzī argues that a theodicy must be strictly subject-centred and is ultimately a futile exercise. This article includes a study and translation of the relevant section in his commentary on Avicenna's *al-Iṣārāt wa-l-tanbihāt* (*Pointers and Reminders*).

Keywords

Faḥr al-Dīn al-Rāzī – Avicenna (Ibn Sīnā) – *Šarḥ al-Iṣārāt wa-l-tanbihāt* (*Commentary on the Pointers and Reminders*) – Neoplatonism – theodicy – anti-theodicy – providence – problem of evil – pessimism – pain

Despite the appeal that the Neoplatonic account of divine providence and theodicy propounded by Avicenna exercised in later philosophical and religious thought, one of his earlier commentators was singularly unimpressed.¹ In his commentary on Avicenna's *al-Iṣārāt wa-l-tanbihāt* (*Pointers and Remind-*

1 This theory of providence, of course, dominated the later philosophical tradition of Neoplatonised Aristotelianism. Beyond this tradition, it had a profound impact most notably on the theology of Avicenna's critic al-Ġazālī (d. 505/1111) (Ormsby, *Theodicy in Islamic Thought*; Frank, *Creation and the Cosmic System*). However, most sixth/twelfth-century theologians

ers), the influential philosopher and theologian Faḥr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1210) subjects this account to what is, without a doubt, the most radical philosophical response it received in medieval Arabic. He refers to this discussion in a later text as his most developed and definitive treatment of the subject.² While Avicenna champions an optimist theodicean thesis of a plenitude of good to support the theory of providence integrated into his cosmogony, his commentator counters by arguing for a plenitude of evil and an overall pessimist anti-theodicy. Rejecting Avicenna's ontological-cum-cosmological account and justification of evil, al-Rāzī argues that a theodicy must be strictly subject-centred and that ultimately it is a futile exercise. This refutation is motivated, not by theological contrarianism, as all too easily assumed on traditional readings of al-Rāzī's commentary and thought, but first and foremost by the commentator's critical method of investigation, as I argued in a recent publication.³ What follows here is an interpretation and a translation of the sectional commentary in which this criticism is set forth.

1 Avicenna on Providence and Theodicy in the *Iṣārāt*

We shall take our cue from Avicenna's *Iṣārāt*. In the second part of the book, which deals with physics and metaphysics, providence is firstly discussed in Chapter (*namaṭ*) 6, titled, "On final causes and their principles, and on the hierarchy" of existents.⁴ Al-Rāzī in his commentary helpfully divides the chapter

were critical of this theory—for instance, the Aš'arī al-Šahrastānī (d. 548/1153) (*Nihāya*, pp. 260–267) and the Mu'tazilī al-Malāḥimī (d. 536/1141) (*Tuhfa*, pp. 9–13, 110–114).

2 Al-Rāzī, *Muḥaṣṣal*, p. 478. A shorter version of the same criticism is found in the *Mulahḥaṣ* (fols. 265^b–266^b), a philosophical work dating slightly earlier than the commentary on the *Iṣārāt*. For an overview of al-Rāzī's criticism of Avicenna's theodicy, see my *Teleological Ethics*, pp. 156 ff. The present article looks more closely at the discussion in his commentary on the *Iṣārāt*.

3 Shihadeh, "Al-Rāzī's Commentary," pp. 297 ff. A hybrid of two distinct commentarial genres—namely, exegetical commentary and aporetic commentary—and hence combining exegetical exposition and aporetics, the book has a programmatic commentarial agenda rooted in its author's method of critical enquiry, or research (*baḥt*), which he presents as an alternative to the traditional school philosophy of mainstream Avicennists and the counter-Avicennist current. Al-Rāzī criticises the former group for their uncritical following (*taqlīd*) of tradition, and the latter for their fixation on dialectic (*ḡadal*). On the distinction between research philosophy and school philosophy, see also Gutas, "Avicenna and After". I am grateful to Professor Gutas for sharing this forthcoming paper with me.

4 Avicenna, *Iṣārāt*, p. 158 (all references are to Forget's edition; chapter numbers are of Part II, on physics and metaphysics). On Avicenna's theory of providence and evil, see also Belo, *Chance*

into three problems (*mas'ala*), explaining both the chapter's overall internal organisation and how the first problem follows on from the previous chapter.⁵ He groups the first nine passages under the first problem (hence, VI.1.1–9), which he titles, “That all that acts through volition (*irāda*) and intention (*qaṣd*) necessarily seeks to be perfected”.⁶ In this cluster of passages, Avicenna addresses the question of whether the acts of the higher efficient causes, above all the First Cause and secondarily the celestial intellects, are motivated by final causes (*ġāya*). Though he does not mention them by name, his discussion includes a refutation of the doctrine of God's moral agency taught by the Mu'tazilī school of *kalām*, on which their theodicy is premised.⁷ As far as I know, the Mu'tazilī background to Avicenna's treatment of providence, especially in the *Iṣārāt*, has so far gone unnoticed.

Avicenna argues that for a thing to be unconditionally perfect, and hence truly self-sufficient (*ġanī*), it cannot depend on anything extraneous to itself for either its essence or any of its intrinsic attributes, though it may be dependent on another for purely relational attributes. So if the First Cause creates, and then provides for, things other than Itself in order to do what is morally good (*al-awlā*, *al-aḥsan*, *al-awḡab*, *al-alyaq*, *al-ġamīl*), It would do so in order to acquire the attribute of being a morally good agent. It would, accordingly, be perfected by the things It creates, because It would lack this attribute were It not to create or provide. Therefore, the First Cause does not act for the sake of (*li-aġl*) lower beings. Its acts, hence, are not motivated by a purpose (*ġaraḍ*), a final cause, which It voluntarily (*bi-l-irāda*) chooses (*iḥtāra*) to pursue to the exclusion of alternative courses of action. Avicenna makes an unmistakable reference here to the Mu'tazilī doctrine that God's acts are morally motivated, and specifically to their sub-doctrine that the creation of the world and humans was a good (*ḥasan*) act motivated by God's beneficence (*iḥsān*), because it proffered to creatures the possibility of attaining great advantages (*manfā'a*) and that further acts are performed out of either favour or duty to them.⁸ Denying

and *Determinism*, pp. 108 ff.; Steel, “Avicenna and Thomas Aquinas”; Rashed, “Théodicée et approximation”; Michot, *La destinée de l'homme*, pp. 57–68. The reading presented here is mine.

5 Al-Rāzī, *Šarḥ*, 2, pp. 433–434.

6 Avicenna, *Iṣārāt*, pp. 158–160; cf. *Šifā'*, *Ilāhiyyāt* VI.5, pp. 296–298 (= *Metaphysics*, pp. 231–234), for a more detailed discussion; al-Rāzī, *Šarḥ*, 2, pp. 433–442. For ease of reference, I shall apply the section numbers of al-Rāzī's commentary to the *Iṣārāt*.

7 On Mu'tazilī theodicy, see Heemskerk, *Suffering in the Mu'tazilite Theology*; Vasalou, *Moral Agents*. On its underlying theory of ethical value and obligation, see Shihadeh, “Theories of Ethical Value,” pp. 388–396.

8 Cf. 'Abd al-Ġabbār, *Muġnī*, II, pp. 58 ff., 134 ff.

that the Creator acts, out of a moral motive, for the benefit of lower things, Avicenna defends an alternative theory of divine providence (*ināya*), according to which the First Cause instead acts by way of munificence (*ǧūd*) (as opposed to the Muʿtazilī principle of beneficence), which is the provision of what is proper to creatures not for a purpose.

Avicenna returns to providence in Chapter 7 of the *Išārāt*, after discussing the knowledge that the First Cause has of Itself and of things other than Itself.⁹ Earlier in the book, he explained that the First Cause is the ultimate efficient cause of all possible existents, which proceed from It either directly or indirectly.¹⁰ Here he argues that the First Cause moreover knows all possible existents, and that It brings them into being in accordance with Its all-encompassing knowledge. It knows Its first effect insofar as it is necessarily caused by It, and knows effects further down the chain of being insofar as they will necessarily be caused by their respective efficient causes. This knowledge, therefore, is not affective and acquired *post hoc*, but ontologically prior (*sābiq*) to the existence of knowledge-objects, and corresponds to the metaphysically necessary cosmic structure that proceeds from the First Cause through the chain of necessitating efficient causes.¹¹ The First's determination (*qaḍāʾ*) of all possible existents lies in Its knowledge, and is realised through Its creative agency, which in fact is identical to Its knowledge.¹² Providence, Avicenna explains, is the First's all-encompassing knowledge of the cosmic order of the good (*nizām al-ḥayr*) proceeding necessarily from Itself, which is the optimal possible order (*aḥsan al-nizām*).¹³ As Avicenna explains in the *Šifāʾ*, the First and other higher causes necessitate their effects just as water, fire and the appetitive power necessitate, respectively, cooling, heating and sexual desire by their essences, the only difference being that the higher causes are also possessed of knowledge of their effects.¹⁴

The next five passages, which conclude Chapter 7 of Avicenna's text, are grouped by al-Rāzī into a problem for which he borrows the title of the corresponding discussion in the *Metaphysics* of the *Šifāʾ*: "On the manner of the entry of evil in divine determination (*al-qaḍāʾ al-ilāhī*)".¹⁵ In the first passage,

9 Avicenna, *Išārāt*, p. 185.

10 Avicenna, *Išārāt*, p. 140.

11 Cf. Avicenna, *Šifāʾ, Ilāhīyyāt* VIII.7, pp. 362–363 (= *Metaphysics*, pp. 291–293).

12 Avicenna, *Išārāt*, p. 185.

13 The expression *nizām al-ḥayr* occurs, for instance, in: Avicenna, *Šifāʾ, Ilāhīyyāt* VIII.7, pp. 363 ff.; IX.4, p. 403; IX.6, pp. 415 ff. (= *Metaphysics*, pp. 291 ff.; 327; 339 ff.).

14 Avicenna, *Šifāʾ, Ilāhīyyāt* IX.3, pp. 398–399 (= *Metaphysics*, p. 323).

15 Avicenna, *Išārāt*, pp. 185–189; al-Rāzī, *Šarḥ*, 2, pp. 547–566; cf. *Šifāʾ, Ilāhīyyāt* IX.6, p. 414 (= *Metaphysics*, p. 339).

labelled a “pointer” (*išāra*), Avicenna provides a general account of the causes of evil in the cosmos, and in four supplementary passages—three labelled “a false notion and a reminder” (*wahm wa-tanbīh*) and one reminder (*tanbīh*)—he develops this account by addressing specific cases that could be cited as counter-evidence. Here we shall focus on the general account in VII.8.1.

The problem that motivates the discussion of evil, which both in this passage and indeed in the more extensive treatments in the *Šifā'* and the *Naǧāt* is implied and not stated, arises at the juncture of two principles that Avicenna has already put forth—namely, his absolute determinism and his valuative characterisation of the work of the First Cause as good and providential. If the First Cause is the ultimate efficient cause of all possible existents, such that nothing comes to be by an efficient cause lying outside Its determination, and if the cosmos It brings into being is, as just explained, the best possible cosmos, then, presumably, it should be entirely good and devoid of evil. However, this account of providence appears to be disrupted by the observation of evil actually occurring in the world. So Avicenna goes on to offer a theodicy, which in effect explains evil away. In his more extended treatment of the subject in the *Šifā'*, he differentiates between two types of evil—namely, evil *per se* (*al-šarr bi-l-dāt*) and accidental evil (*al-šarr bi-l-ʿaraḍ*).¹⁶ Evil *per se* includes such phenomena as inborn deformities and injuries, and is privative and intrinsic to the thing itself. The essence of evil, therefore, is privation (*ʿadam*), specifically privation in the first perfection proper to a thing on account of its species.¹⁷ Earlier in the book, Avicenna identified the good with existence.¹⁸ Such *per se* evils are caused not by the higher, metaphysical efficient cause that confers the forms of sub-lunar objects—that is, the Agent Intellect—but rather by a deficiency in the material substrate of the object, which renders it an imperfect receptacle to the form. This deficiency either lies in a disposition that occurs to the material substrate at the moment of a thing's coming-to-be and hinders the readiness, or proximate potentiality, of matter to receive a perfect form (as in the case of inborn deformities), or it supervenes (*taraʿa*) on matter after the coming-to-be of a thing causing an imperfection therein (as in the case of injury, or the absence of water for a living being).¹⁹ Either way, the deficiency is engendered by the activity of natural efficient causes, that is, causes that produce

16 Avicenna, *Šifāʾ, Ilāhīyyāt* IX.6, pp. 414–422 (= *Metaphysics*, pp. 339–347).

17 Avicenna, *Šifāʾ, Ilāhīyyāt* IX.6, pp. 416, 417, 422 (= *Metaphysics*, pp. 340, 341–342, 347). So, as he explains, because it is not a privation in a thing, absolute non-existence is not evil.

18 Avicenna, *Šifāʾ, Ilāhīyyāt* VIII.6, pp. 355–356 (= *Metaphysics*, pp. 283–284).

19 Reading *aw li-amr* for *wa-li-amr* (*Šifāʾ, Ilāhīyyāt* IX.6, p. 416, l. 11 = *Metaphysics*, p. 340, l. 17).

motion in existent things.²⁰ Accidental evil, on the other hand, is extrinsic to the thing itself and lies in such natural efficient causes, which either conduce to a privation in the thing itself or serve as obstructions to the thing's realisation of perfection.²¹ For instance, when fire burns a human, it causes an injury, which is an intrinsic, privative evil; but the individual will moreover perceive the fire, the external cause of the injury, as evil. However, fire is not an intrinsic, *per se* evil (*šarr fī nafsihi*), because in itself it serves a good end and is a necessary part of the most perfect cosmic order possible, whose perfection is to possess the property of burning. Its evilness, rather, is only relative to (*bi-l-qiyās ilā*) certain types of things, such as animal bodies, with which it comes into contact adventitiously (*bi-l-ittifāq*).²² Avicenna describes these adventitious occurrences as unintended collisions (*mušādamāt, mušakkāt*) between different components of the cosmos as they undergo motion. Overall, he reasons, most existents realise the good they are intended for by their nature, whereas evils, of both types, occur only in a minority of sub-lunar existents; most humans, for instance, are neither born deformed, nor burnt by fire. Therefore, good is predominant (*akṭarī*), and evil minor (*aqallī*) and sparse.

This theodicy is summarised nicely in the following concise account of Avicenna's theory of divine providence given in his *Uyūn al-ḥikma*:

When it is said [that the First is] pure good, this means [1] that It is perfect of existence and free from potentiality and imperfection; for evilness in a thing is a privation specific to it. It is said of It that It is good also [2] because It provides to everything the goodness proper to it; for It provides benefit essentially and by way of bestowal (*wiṣāl*), and causes harm accidentally and by way of inhibition (*infiṣāl*). By "bestowal", I mean the reception of Its effects; and by "inhibition", I mean that Its effects be impeded.²³

The First Cause's goodness in the second sense is associated with both the good It produces and the status of evil as either accidental or privative. So unless and

20 Avicenna, *Šifāʾ, Ilāhiyyāt* IX.6, pp. 416–417 (= *Metaphysics*, pp. 340–341). Imperfections can also be the result of a deficient or excessive quantity of matter (cf. Avicenna, *Šifāʾ, Ṭabīʿiyyāt* I.1.13, p. 85). For Avicenna, natural efficient causes produce motion, whereas metaphysical efficient causes produce existence.

21 Reading *al-muʿdīm* for *al-maʿdūm* (*Šifāʾ, Ilāhiyyāt* IX.6, p. 416, l. 7 [= *Metaphysics*, p. 340, l. 12]; cf. l. 17).

22 Cf. Avicenna, *Šifāʾ, Ilāhiyyāt* VI.5, p. 298 (= *Metaphysics*, p. 225); cf. *Šifāʾ, Ṭabīʿiyyāt* I.1.13, pp. 81–90.

23 Avicenna, *Uyūn*, 59.

until evil is shown to be accidental or privative, its presence in the cosmos will appear *prima facie* inconsistent with the First Cause's goodness.

In *Iṣārāt* VII.8.1, the discussion likewise turns on the problem of the presence of evil in the cosmos, when the First Cause is absolutely good. A brief and partial theodicy, which appeals only to the accidental type of evil, is offered.²⁴ Avicenna begins with a fourfold logical disjunction (*qisma*) of possible things into those that are purely good, those that are in themselves good but accidentally evil, those that are purely evil, and those that are predominantly evil. "Because pure munificence is the principle for the emanation of the existence²⁵ that is good and right (*ṣawāb*)", he argues, the first two divisions are necessarily brought into being. So, purely good things exist, the case in point being the celestial intellects. Things of the second type too exist, because they are indispensable to the good cosmic order and as such themselves good, despite the accidental evil they cause when they collide with certain types of other things. Not to create such things would, in the large scheme of the cosmos, be to withhold the great good (*ḥayr katīr*) that they provide; and to do so "in order to prevent a minor evil would amount to a great evil".²⁶ Avicenna gives the examples of fire, which causes harm to an animal body when it collides with it, and animal bodies, which "like fire" may cause harm to other things. Because of various accidental evils, some humans will acquire false beliefs and moral vices, which may be detrimental to them in the hereafter.²⁷ Overall, however, most humans live in a sound condition (*salāma*) and only a minority are affected by evils; and evils, he opines, affect humans only for a small proportion of the time. Therefore, evils are not only accidental to the cosmos, but also minor features thereof. Although the third and fourth divisions of the disjunction—things that are purely evil, and things that are predominantly evil—are not discussed, it goes without saying that neither actually exists, as in fact confirmed in the *Šifā'*.²⁸

2 Al-Rāzī's Criticism

Al-Rāzī's extended commentary on VII.8.1, translated in full below, starts with an overall exegetical commentary, or interpretation (*tafsīr*), which provides a

24 Avicenna, *Iṣārāt*, pp. 185–187.

25 Reading *wuḡūd*, as in some manuscripts (and Dunyā's edition, p. 300), for *ḡūd*, as in Forget's edition (p. 186, l. 4).

26 Avicenna, *Iṣārāt*, p. 186.

27 Cf. Avicenna, *Šifā', Ilāhiyyāt* IX.6, p. 422 (= *Metaphysics*, p. 347).

28 Avicenna, *Šifā', Ilāhiyyāt* IX.6, p. 421 (= *Metaphysics*, p. 346).

lucid and faithful exposition of the contents of the passage.²⁹ Then follows an extended aporetic commentary, introduced, as customary in al-Rāzī's book, by the clause, "It may be argued" (*li-qā'il an yaqūla*).³⁰ He advances two criticisms, which, as is generally characteristic of his aporetic commentary, follow a logical sequence. Both criticisms go beyond Avicenna's passage to query its unstated underpinnings, first the implicit problem that it addresses, and second an unstated definition that it assumes.

Al-Rāzī begins his aporetic commentary by asking why Avicenna enquires into the problem of evil in the first place.³¹ The problem, he says, presupposes two doctrines, neither of which, however, is upheld by Avicenna. As already pointed out, although Avicenna does not explicitly formulate the problem that leads him to discuss the causes of evil, the discussion is motivated by a version of the conventional problem of evil: if God is good and the sole creator of the world, then why does the world contain evil? For al-Rāzī, this problem turns on an account of the moral agency of God, and any such account must be premised on two doctrines.

The first is that God be a voluntary agent, capable of choosing freely between performing a given act and not performing it. Al-Rāzī reasons that if an efficient cause necessitates its acts through its essence, and does not choose them freely when it was equally capable of choosing alternative acts, its acts, be they good or evil, can have no cause other than the agent's essence. So if, as Avicenna holds, God is a necessitating cause, it would be specious then to ask, "Why does evil occur in His acts?". For, as al-Rāzī notes briefly towards the end of his commentary on the passage, this question is one that seeks a cause (*'illa*), whereas the First Cause acts through Its essence and not through some other cause.³² The cause referred to here is a final cause (*'illa ḡā'yya*), a purpose (*maqṣūd*), which would motivate the acts of the First Cause. Al-Rāzī's objection can be unpacked as follows. Starting with the assumption that the Creator is the cause, direct or indirect, of the cosmos and of all that exists and occurs therein, we can proceed in either of two directions, depending on which account of agency we adopt. If the Creator acts by choosing voluntarily out of alternative possible acts and as such, on Avicenna's analysis of voluntary action, acts in pursuit of final causes, He would be capable to choose freely to create either a cosmos

29 Al-Rāzī, *Šarḥ*, 2, pp. 548–549 (p. 75 below).

30 On the organisation and commentarial procedure of this text, see Shihadeh, "Al-Rāzī's Commentary," esp. pp. 309–312.

31 Al-Rāzī, *Šarḥ*, 2, pp. 549–550 (p. 76 below).

32 Al-Rāzī, *Šarḥ*, 2, p. 555 (pp. 80–81 below).

devoid of evil, or one in which evil occurs. If He chooses the latter, then that would raise the question of why He made this choice. If, however, the Creator, as Avicenna in fact holds, is an efficient cause that necessitates Its acts through its essence, then It would produce everything, good or evil, through sheer metaphysical necessity. Consequently, the First Cause would not be characterised by any sort of moral agency, which would require an agent to do good acts and to refrain from evil ones, and which would render him deserving of blame should he choose and do evil. On this model, therefore, the problem of evil does not arise.

The second underpinning of the problem of evil is what al-Rāzī refers to here as the doctrine that goodness and badness are rational (*al-ḥusn wa-l-qubḥ 'aqliyyān*), which should be read as a reference, not to ethical rationalism broadly conceived, but specifically to ethical realism of the type propounded by the Mu'tazila.³³ According to this theory, acts can have ethical attributes that are real and mind-independent, and agents will be under an obligation to refrain from performing evil acts and will deserve blame should they perform them. This, of course, is not a view that Avicenna champions. Al-Rāzī's point here is that for evil to be a theological problem that requires a solution, its occurrence must *prima facie* stand in tension with the moral agency of the Creator. However, just as Aš'arīs do not develop a theodicy because they do not acknowledge the root problem, so too must Avicenna concede that the presence of evil in the cosmos does not pose a theological problem. As al-Rāzī puts it, Avicenna is "exempt" from having to address this problem, so his enquiry into it is "superfluous" (*fudūl*).

A traditional Avicennist would respond that the problem that motivates the discussion is that the First Cause is good in Its essence, and what is good in its essence must correspondingly be good in its acts and hence produce no evil, where "good" and "evil" are defined respectively as perfection and imperfection.³⁴ As such, it seems to presuppose neither of the two theses previously mentioned. Al-Rāzī, however, would dismiss this argument as rhetorical, as he does in his commentary on several arguments adduced in Avicenna's discussion of providence in *Išārāt* VI.1.³⁵ For without resting on a theory of moral

33 On which, see Shihadeh, "Theories of Ethical Value," pp. 388–396. In later works, he expands the scope of ethical rationalism to include non-realist theories (Shihadeh, *Teleological Ethics*, Chapter 2).

34 This is how al-Ṭūsī (d. 672/1274) and Quṭb al-Dīn al-Rāzī al-Taḥṭānī (d. 766/1364) formulate the problem in their super-commentaries on the *Išārāt* (respectively, *Ḥall*, pp. 304–305; *Muḥākamāt*, pp. 406, 407).

35 Al-Rāzī, *Šarḥ*, 2, pp. 435, 436, 438–439, 442.

value and agency, the premise, that necessarily a cause that is good in essence produces a correspondingly-good effect, remains unsubstantiated.³⁶

Although, at first blush, al-Rāzī's first criticism might appear to be an *ad hominem* (*ex concessis*) argument (*ilzām*) that seeks to force Avicennists to concede an Aš'arī-style anti-theodicean position, the criticism in fact is not a theological refutation.³⁷ Theologically, it would be a pointless exercise, because the consequent thesis is premised on a conception of divine agency that is contrary to the principle of God's voluntary agency, which, as a fundamental doctrine (*aṣl*), has primacy, to an Aš'arī, over the secondary question (*far'*) of whether God's voluntary acts are subject to moral motives. The criticism rather is philosophically motivated, and exhibits al-Rāzī's dialectical method of investigation, according to which problems proceed, in the first instance, through a sequence of logical disjunctions, on which actual historical positions are then superimposed.³⁸ In the case at hand, the problem of the nature of God's agency is primary—specifically, whether the Creator is a necessitating efficient cause (the position of Avicenna and other Neoplatonised Aristotelians) or a voluntary agent (the classical *kalām* position). If He is a voluntary agent, then either evil has a mind-independent reality (the Mu'tazilī position), or it does not (the Aš'arī position). If it does, then why does God choose to create a world in which evil occurs? However, if the Creator is a necessitating cause, then the problem of evil does not arise. Al-Rāzī's point is that a good, critical philosopher would have to concede this.

That said, al-Rāzī's criticism may have a secondary, theological motive stemming from his interest in exploring resonances between Avicennan philosophy and Aš'arī theology. It may be that by arguing that it would have been more consistent for Avicenna to espouse an anti-theodicean position, he felt that this might be a point of intersection between the two systems of thought.

What further indicates that al-Rāzī's criticism should not be read as a theological refutation is that he goes on to offer, on behalf of Avicennists, two possible alternative objectives for enquiring into the causes and ontology of evil.³⁹ Towards the end of his commentary on the passage, he says that it is sound for Avicennists to enquire into this, so long as the enquiry is motivated by either of these objectives, and hence does not turn on an ostensible tension

36 This objection is actually made by Mirzā Ğān al-Bāġnawī (d. 995/1587) in his own super-commentary on the *Iṣārāt*, which is generally sympathetic to al-Rāzī's commentary (*Hāšīya*, p. 434).

37 On Aš'arī anti-theodicy, see Shihadeh, *Teleological Ethics*, pp. 83 ff.

38 Shihadeh, "Al-Rāzī's Commentary," pp. 299–302.

39 Al-Rāzī, *Šarḥ*, 2, p. 550 (p. 76 below).

between the moral agency of the Creator and the presence of evil.⁴⁰ The first is that this enquiry provides a taxonomy of possible existents according to how good or evil they are, which would allow us to classify existents accordingly. The central question would probably thus be: in what respects, intrinsic or accidental, is each part of the cosmos good or evil? The investigation would cease to be motivated by the problem of evil and hence would not be theodicean. The second is that the enquiry seeks to understand and describe the optimal, or most perfect, cosmic order (*al-niẓām al-akmal*), first by establishing a conception of the optimal cosmic order, and then by affirming its existence on the grounds that the First Cause knows this order and hence creates the cosmos in accordance with this knowledge. Al-Rāzī does not elaborate, but his proposed objective seems to alter the problem from “Why does evil occur in the acts of the First Cause when It is perfectly good in Itself?” to “Why does evil occur in the cosmos when it is the best possible cosmos?”. Presumably, this would again render the discussion non-theodicean, as it shifts it away from divine agency to cosmology.

In his second criticism, al-Rāzī turns from Avicenna's motive for enquiring into the problem of evil to his solution to it.⁴¹ He begins by examining Avicenna's concepts of good and evil, which form the starting point for the fivefold logical disjunction of possible existents into the purely good, the predominantly good, the neutral, in which good and evil are equivalent (a missing division included in the disjunction set out in the *Šifā'*),⁴² the predominantly evil and the purely evil. Al-Rāzī reintroduces the *per se*, intrinsic notion of evil as privation, which Avicenna leaves out of the theodicy briefly laid out in the *Iṣārāt*. He complains that it is a commonplace—a conventional (*iṣṭahāra*, hence *mašhūr*) view—among Avicennists to assert that good is existence and evil is non-existence, assertions that they reiterate uncritically and support using a mere handful of examples: for instance, both the breaking up of the continuity of an injured person's body and the subsequent loss of life are privative. Now, the assertions, “Good is existence” and “Evil is non-existence”, al-Rāzī reasons, either define the expressions “good” and “evil”, or are propositions that predicate existence of good, and non-existence of evil. If the former, then Avicenna is entitled to define these expressions thus, because anyone may, in principle, assign any meaning to any expression. Which is to say that his definitions would be nominal, or more precisely stipulative, since they serve merely to inform us of the meanings that he and fellow Neoplatonists chose to

40 Al-Rāzī, *Šarḥ*, 2, p. 555 (p. 81 below).

41 Al-Rāzī, *Šarḥ*, 2, pp. 550–551 (pp. 76–77 below).

42 Avicenna, *Šifā'*, *Ilāhiyyāt* IX.6, p. 421 (= *Metaphysics*, pp. 345–346).

give to these terms. However, al-Rāzī objects that such definitions would not require a supporting argument such as the one adduced by Avicenna. If, on the other hand, the assertions are propositions, then their subjects, “good” and “evil”, should firstly be defined; yet Avicenna offers no such definition. What is more, Avicenna’s argument is an argument from analogy (*tamṭīl*), one that starts from particular examples (sg. *miṭāl*) and arrives at the universal propositions, “Good is existence” and “Evil is non-existence”. He refers us to Avicenna’s own verdict that analogical arguments are non-demonstrative.⁴³

As we saw earlier from the corresponding discussion in the *Šifāʾ*, Avicenna in fact holds that privation defines “evil”; it is evil *per se* (*bi-l-dāt*).⁴⁴ He acknowledges that the expression has other senses, such as pain, but deems these as adventitious features that are sometimes associated with privation and as such extraneous to the definition of “evil”. So these senses are reducible to the primary sense of privation. Pain occurs when the continuity of a bodily organ is broken up by an external cause, such as fire, and the absence of continuity is privative; so even though “pain” and “distress” (*ḡamm*) denote existent things (*maʿānithā wuḡūdiyya*), these “go back to privations and imperfections”, and therefore, it seems, merit no further consideration as evils requiring, in their own right, of justification against the backdrop of a perfectly-ordered cosmos produced by a provident Creator.⁴⁵ It is indeed striking how little attention Avicenna affords, and how he effectively trivialises, bodily suffering in his theodicy, which rests on a largely ontological analysis of evil. Bodily pain and distress hardly register in the broader, cosmic scheme of things, and they, after all, are given an inferior status in Avicenna’s soteriology and eschatology. Just as bodily pleasures, which humans share with other animals (or, with donkeys, as Avicenna has it!), are base in comparison to intellectual happiness, so too are the severest bodily pains insignificant in comparison to the misery that the soul may experience.⁴⁶

Despite considering the two foregoing interpretations of Avicenna’s assertions, “Good is existence” and “Evil is non-existence”, al-Rāzī, in the *Mulaḥḥaṣ*, clearly reads them as defining “good” and “evil”. He complains that because these definitions, in his view, are stipulative, the problem at the centre of Avi-

43 Avicenna, *Šifāʾ*, *Mantiq IV. al-Qiyās* 1X.23, pp. 568–569; *Naḡāt*, pp. 107–108.

44 See also al-Ṭūsī’s response to al-Rāzī’s objection (*Hall*, 3, p. 305).

45 Avicenna, *Šifāʾ*, *Ilāhiyyāt* 1X.6, p. 419 (= *Metaphysics*, p. 343). Marmura renders *tatbaʿu* as “follow [from]” (his brackets). What Avicenna seems to intend, however, is that pains not only follow privations as their effects, but also go back to them in their evilness. So pain is not evil in itself.

46 Avicenna, *Šifāʾ*, *Ilāhiyyāt* 1X.7, pp. 423 ff., esp. pp. 427–428 (= *Metaphysics*, pp. 351–352).

cenna's theodicy is fundamentally semantic, in that it turns merely on what we mean (*'anaynā*) by expressions (*baḥt lafẓī*).⁴⁷ From his reductive definition of evil, Avicenna adumbrates, through the foregoing disjunction, a thoroughly sanitised perspective of the quality and quantity of evil in the cosmos. In the commentary on the *Iṣārāt*, al-Rāzī counters by submitting that, in "common and prevalent parlance" (*al-'urf al-'āmm al-mašhūr*), "evil" in fact denotes nothing but pain or what results in pain, that is, any direct or indirect cause thereof. Likewise, "good" denotes either pleasure, or the neutral state of bodily and psychological soundness, in which neither pain nor pleasure are experienced. This, hence, is the principal lexical definition of the term "evil", and it is the sense that must be the foremost concern in a theodicy. For if a problem centres on a choice between two nominal definitions, it seems rather counter-intuitive to opt for a stipulative definition proposed by an elite group of philosophers over a sound and prevalent lexical definition, especially when the problem is often faced by non-philosophers. By identifying the lexical definitions of "good" and "evil" as primary, al-Rāzī reorients the discussion from the ontology of the cosmos to the subjective perceptions of pleasure and pain, so much so that instead of Avicenna's disjunction of existent things based on their degree of perfection and inter-collisions, al-Rāzī lays out an alternative, subject-centred division of good and evil according to the "state of a living being" (*ḥāl al-ḥayawān*), which he proceeds to elaborate both qualitatively, in terms of the ontology of perceptual contents, and quantitatively, in terms of their amount and intensity.

Al-Rāzī's threefold division is that, at any given moment, a living being can be either (i) in pleasure, which is subjectively good, or (ii) in pain, which is subjectively evil, or (iii) in neither pleasure nor pain, which is a subjectively neutral state. Through this division, he counters Avicenna's ontological division through which he advances his qualitative view that evil is essentially privative and the quantitative corollary that it is minor in the cosmos, and he argues, contrarily, that it is in fact good that is overwhelmingly privative and meagre, and evil that is existent and in much greater supply. As for pain, everyone, al-Rāzī says, agrees that it is an existent thing. By everyone, he means philosophers, who recognised pain as a perception, and theologians, who considered it to be an accident, in the sense of a superaddition object (*ma'nā*) that supervenes upon the body. The reality of pain is a point, as already noted, that Avicenna himself concedes. What people ordinarily refer to as "evil", therefore, is an existent thing and not privative. The ontology of pleasure, on the other

47 Al-Rāzī, *Mulāḥḥas*, fol. 265^b.

hand, was disputed, most notably by the philosopher Abū Bakr Muḥammad ibn Zakariyyā al-Rāzī (d. 313/925), who maintained that pleasure was nothing more than the cessation (*zawāl*) of pain. On this analysis, eating, for example, appears pleasurable, not because it causes some real sensation of pleasure, but only because it relieves the prior pain of hunger.⁴⁸ Faḥr al-Dīn al-Rāzī reports counter-arguments adduced, as he says, by philosophers and theologians to affirm the reality of pleasure.⁴⁹ For instance, one finds pleasure in perceiving a sound or an image, which one previously did not know existed; this pleasure cannot be reduced to the cessation of a prior pain of desire. He does not follow through the question of the ontology of pleasure here, but instead goes on to propose a middle position. According to this position, pleasures divide into real ones (*ladda ḥaqīqiyya*), which are an existent quality (*kayfiyya wuḡūdiyya*), and mere cessations of prior pains, which are hence non-existent states (*ḥāla ‘adamiyya*); however, the majority of pleasures that people experience in this world (as opposed to the hereafter) are of the latter type, a point that al-Rāzī illustrates through several examples. These examples include the most important types of pleasures, including those associated with food, drink, sex, wealth and social status. Real pleasures, such as those found in perceiving a sound or an image that one previously did not know existed, which we may class as aesthetic pleasures, are exceedingly sparse, “like a drop in the ocean.”⁵⁰ The last of the states set out in al-Rāzī’s threefold division is the neutral, baseline state of health (*ṣiḥḥa*), or soundness (*salāma*), in which the living being finds neither pleasure nor pain, and as such is neither good nor evil. Soundness here refers to the absence of causes for either bodily or psychological pain, which can be internal to the body, such as illnesses, or external to it, such as humans with whom one associates. This neutral state of soundness, he argues, is definitely not pleasurable, and accordingly cannot be deemed good, because real pleasure is an experiential state that the perceiver finds internally within oneself (*ḥāla wiḡdāniyya*)—the perceiver’s “finding” (*wiḡdān*) presupposes the perceived state’s existence (*wuḡūd*)—and one does not experience such an internal state from mere health.⁵¹

48 Cf. Ibn Zakariyyā al-Rāzī, *Tibb*, pp. 36 ff.; Adamson, “Platonic Pleasures”.

49 To my knowledge, extant responses to Ibn Zakariyyā al-Rāzī’s theory of pleasure are all by theologians. For instance, Ibn Mattawayh, *Taḍkira*, 1, pp. 40, 163–165; Abū Raṣīd, *Ziyādāt*, pp. 285–286, 291–293; ‘Abd al-Ġabbār, *Muḡnī*, 11, pp. 80–81.

50 Al-Rāzī, *Šarḥ*, 2, p. 555 (p. 81 below).

51 On *wiḡdān* see, for instance, al-Rāzī, *Tafsīr*, 1, pp. 118–119. The notion that health is not pleasurable derives from Ibn Zakariyyā al-Rāzī (Adamson, “Platonic Pleasures,” pp. 84 ff.).

Overall, therefore, humans spend almost the entirety of their lives either in a neutral state, or striving to prevent or eliminate various sorts of pain, ranging from the severe pains of illness to the mild inconveniences permeating everyday life. Pleasures of both variants, especially real pleasures, are seldom experienced, and then only fleetingly. So in quantitative terms, it is not good, but evil that is overwhelmingly prevalent (*ġālib*). The plenitude of evil in al-Rāzī's world is directly antithetical to the plenitude of good in Avicenna's. This bleak pessimism is not a position that al-Rāzī proposes for dialectical expediency, but, as I have shown elsewhere, reflects his true conviction.⁵²

Al-Rāzī, accordingly, advances a *reductio ad absurdum* against the notion that God creates the world for a purpose (*maqṣūd*).⁵³ His purpose cannot be to afford humans and other animals the possibility to experience pleasures, because pains in fact far outweigh pleasures; so the net sum would be a great amount of pain. It cannot be to afford them the possibility to experience pains, as this would render creation an act of "pure evil". The purpose, finally, cannot be to afford them neither possibility, as this would render creation purposeless, and as such less compelling an option than not creating at all. The conclusion that the First Cause does not create the world for a purpose, he then notes, is acknowledged by the critical investigators (*muḥaqqiqūn*) among the philosophers, which is to say, those who are not motivated by partisan bias and adherence to received teachings—a reference primarily to Avicenna, who defended this view earlier in the *Iṣārāt*. This conclusion confirms al-Rāzī's earlier contention that if the Creator is a cause that necessitates its effects and does not act in pursuit of a final cause, then the cosmos It produces may contain (non-accidental and non-privative) evil. Here he concludes that the cosmos is in fact predominantly evil.

To recapitulate, al-Rāzī takes a strongly anti-theodicean position. In his theological works, this stance finds expression in his version of Aṣ'arī theological voluntarism and refutation of Mu'tazilī ethical realism and theodicy.⁵⁴ What he advocates in his commentary on the *Iṣārāt*, however, is not theological voluntarism—as Avicenna does not conceive of the Creator as a voluntary agent—but philosophical rigour. Al-Rāzī argues that Avicenna wades into a

52 Shihadeh, *Teleological Ethics*, Chapter 4.

53 Al-Rāzī, *Ṣarḥ*, 2, pp. 553–555 (pp. 79–80 below).

54 Shihadeh, *Teleological Ethics*, Chapter 2. Although, at the end of the passage, al-Rāzī refers briefly to the great pleasures he hopes to attain in the hereafter, this should be read as a digressive personal remark, and not as evidence of an eschatological theodicy (*Ṣarḥ*, 2, p. 556; p. 81 below). In fact, he goes on to raise objections to the eschatological component of Avicenna's theodicy (*Ṣarḥ*, 2, pp. 556–562).

question that, in his philosophical system, should in fact be a non-problem, and he then fails to address it. A critically-minded Avicennist, therefore, should recognise that theodicy has no place in philosophy.

3 Translation: Al-Rāzī, *Šarḥ al-Išārāt* VII.8.1.⁵⁵

3.1 [Exegetical Commentary]

3.1.1 Interpretation

The objective of this section is to identify the causes of evil. The discussion starts from the following division: an existent is either purely good, predominantly good, equally good and evil, predominantly evil, or purely evil. These five disjuncts are exhaustive.

As for the first division, divine wisdom, being the origin of mercy and the source of goodness and munificence, determines its realisation. The realisation of the second division [too] is determined by [divine] wisdom, because if it were not realised, the predominant goods [therein] would remain unrealised. So, the realisation of [this division] results in little harm and a great good, and the nonrealisation thereof would result in the opposite; wisdom dictates that the lesser of two harms ought to be endured for the sake of preventing the greater of the two. This is what they [i.e. primarily Avicenna] mean by saying that the nonrealisation of a greater good for the sake of preventing a minor evil is a great evil. An example of this division is fire; for it is impossible for it to exist possessed of its nature and property, which provides immense benefits, without it being such that on occasion it results in the burning of an animal. [Likewise,] humans cannot exist with the soul, body, faculties and properties they have without some individuals accidentally being affected by flaws in their theoretical or practical dispositions, which cause them harm in the hereafter. As for the remaining three divisions, none of them exist. For when we reflect on the conditions of the inhabitants of this world,⁵⁶ we find that even though illness and pain are abundant, health and soundness are more prevalent, more complete and more plentiful.

Knowing this, it becomes evident that evil enters divine determination by accident, which is to say that because things that are predominantly good are produced for the sake of their preponderant goods, the minor evils concomitant to them inexorably exist. Were they not concomitant to those goods, they would not have existed.

55 Al-Rāzī, *Šarḥ*, 2, pp. 548–556.

56 Reading *ahl hādā l-‘ālam*, as in some MSS.

3.2 [Aporetic Commentary]

3.2.1 [For Avicenna, Evil Should Not Be a Problem]

One may argue to the philosophers [as follows]. You are, in accordance with your principles (*uṣūl*), exempt from having to enquire into this problem; so your discussion thereof is superfluous (*fudūl*). We say that “you are, in accordance with your principles, exempt from having to enquire into it”, because sound enquiry into this problem is conditional on both the view that the Agent who produced the world is freely choosing (*muḥtār*) and the view that goodness and badness are rational, whereas you subscribe to neither of these two principles.

The view [that the Creator is] a freely choosing agent is prerequisite because the question, “Why does evil exist in the acts of God?”, applies only if He is a freely choosing [agent], able either to act or not to act, so that it could be asked, “Why did He do this, and not that?”. If, however, He necessitates (*mūǧīb*) [His acts] through His essence, such that it is rationally impossible for Him not to produce the things that proceed from Him, one cannot ask, “Why did He do this, and not that?”. For the answer would then be that these acts proceed from Him because His essence necessitates them through itself, and it would be rationally impossible for them not to proceed from Him, whether these acts are purely good or purely evil.

As for the view that the goodness and badness [of acts] are rational, it is prerequisite because if it is not accepted, everything will be good and rightly done by God, as Aš‘arīs hold. Therefore, it cannot be claimed that God cannot possibly do evil, and that He necessarily does good.

It follows that this enquiry presupposes the position of those who subscribe to these two principles, namely the Mu‘tazila. As for those who deny them, they are exempt from this enquiry, so their discussion of it is superfluous.

3.2.2 [Alternative Objectives to the Enquiry into Evil]

The philosophers may say [in response]: “Our objective from this enquiry is twofold. The first is to know under which of the foregoing five divisions [each of] the things created by God falls, which is to say that the aim is to find out whether creatures are purely good, purely evil, or mixed [of good and evil]. The second is that we hold that God’s knowledge of the most perfect order is the cause for the existence of that order. So we delineated the most perfect order in order to establish that it exists”.

3.2.3 [The Avicennan Principle that Evil Is Privative]

Putting this consideration aside, [we argue that] the disjunction on which they have based the foremost principle in this discussion turns on a conception of the essence of good and evil. So we must first of all enquire into this.

We say, it is conventional among the philosophers to say that good is existence and that evil is privation, and they sometimes try to infer this from examples. For instance, they say: “We judge killing to be evil, but when we distinguish its existent aspects from its privative aspects, we find that evil is nothing but privatives. For if we consider the killer’s being capable of killing, [we find that] it is good, because capacity is a perfection and good; if we consider the knife’s [property of] cutting, [we find that] it is good, because the perfection of a knife is that it be so; and if we consider an organ’s susceptibility to being cut, [we find that] it too is good, because if it were hard and impervious to knives, that would be evil. However, if we consider the loss of the killed person’s life, and the breaking up of the continuity of his body, we find that they are evil; and it is known that these two aspects are privative. We know, therefore, that good is existence and that evil is privation”.

3.2.4 [Avicenna’s Definitions of Good and Evil]

Know that this is not a good argument, because one who says, “Good is existence, and evil is privation”, may intend by this [1] to define (*tafsīr*) the expression “good” as existence, and the expression “evil” as privation. In this case, however, one would not need to infer and argue for this, because anyone may define any expression they wish with any meaning they wish. Alternatively, should one intend by this [2] to pass a judgement on the good, that it must be existent, and on the bad, that it must be privative, such that [the assertion] becomes a proposition whose subject is “the good” and whose predicate is “existent”, then this would be achievable only after the essences of good and evil have been conceptualised. But this is what we are currently discussing. It follows that [the argument] they adduce is inadequate. Putting this consideration aside, [we further argue that] this [argument] rests on the mere citation of examples; and you already know that this does not provide certainty.

3.2.5 [The Lexical Definitions of Good and Evil]

Know that what people mean by the expression “evil”, in common and prevalent parlance, is nothing but pain or what results in it. It is known immediately that pain is something existent; there is no disagreement on this among sound-minded people. Granted, some people claim that pleasure is the cessation of pain, and thus view it as something privative. However, there is no disagreement among them on that pain is something existent. This being the case, it is evident that what people refer to by the expression “evil” is something existent. As for “good”, it may apply to the privation of pain, such that it is said of a man in a state of soundness that he is in a good [state] (*fi l-ḥayr*), or it may apply to pleasure.

3.2.6 [The Ontology of Pleasure]

Now that you know these details, let us leave aside the discussion of expressions. We say, a living being must be in either of three states: it can be in [a state of] pleasure, or in pain, or devoid of both. As for pleasure, some people have denied its existence, specifically Muḥammad ibn Zakariyyā al-Rāzī, for he claimed that it has no reality other than the cessation of pain. So the pleasure we find in eating has no reality other than the cessation of the pain of hunger, and the pleasure we find in drinking has no reality other than the cessation of the pain of thirst. For this reason, the greater the hunger and thirst, the more intense the pleasure that obtains from eating and drinking. Likewise, the pleasure that obtains from sitting in a cool breeze in summer and in a warm breeze in winter is the cessation of pain [caused by] a harmful quality, and so is the pleasure that obtains from wearing clothes and riding means of transport. Similarly, the pleasure that obtains from sexual intercourse stems only from expelling a harmful waste substance.⁵⁷

Most philosophers and theologians, however, reject this view for [the following] reasons.

The first is that it is impossible for privation to vary in intensity and mildness. If pleasure were privative, no pleasure would be more intense than another pleasure.

The second is that we find pleasure in the perception of a sound or an image that we perceive, before it occurs to us that it exists; so it cannot be claimed that this pleasure obtains from the cessation of the pain of desire. For in this case, pleasure obtains without coinciding with a cessation of pain. Likewise, we experience pleasure in looking at some individuals, but suffer no pain from their absence; so it cannot be said that pleasure is relief from a painful thing.

The third is that it follows from [Ibn Zakariyyā al-Rāzī's view] that it would not be sensible for sound-minded people whose appetite is poor to treat their poor appetite using foul-tasting drugs so as to find pleasure in food. For they would then be much the same as one who torments himself so as to experience pleasure when he ceases to torment himself.⁵⁸

These are [the arguments] that have been adduced against the view of Muḥammad ibn Zakariyyā.

57 That is, semen.

58 Reading *ta'dībihā* for *taǧḍiyatihā*. So although the acts in both cases correspond, the resultant pleasures do not.

3.2.7 [The Purpose of Creation, and the Plenitude of Evil]

The existence of pleasure having been established, we say that the purpose of creation is to make possible the experience either of pleasures, or of pains, or of neither pleasures nor pains. If [the purpose is] to give [creatures] the opportunity to experience pleasures, this would prove false if we accepted Ibn Zakariyyā's view. Should we concede, however, that [pleasure] is something real (*tubūti*), we will, upon reflection, find that pleasure is exceedingly meagre, and that what prevails among people, rather, is either pain or the cessation of pain, because soundness has no reality save the body's constantly being devoid of pain. The saying, "soundness [i.e. health] is pleasurable", is a delusional notion; for pleasure is a state found [internally by the perceiver] (*hāla wiġdāniyya*),⁵⁹ so unless we find it in ourselves it cannot be claimed to exist. We shall set this out in more detail in Chapter Eight.⁶⁰ Likewise, being free from external and internal harms has no reality save the absence of pain and the absence of what results in pain. Also, life amenities, such as accommodation, property, wealth and prestige, are, when available, nothing but means to prevent foreseeable pains. As for the pleasures that obtain from eating, drinking, sitting in an agreeable breeze and wearing agreeable clothes, they reduce to the cessation of the pain of hunger and thirst and the discomfort caused by heat and cold.

It cannot be argued that if this were the case, no food would be preferable to another, nor would a female sexual mate be preferable to another, for if the objective [sought] in all alternatives were to eliminate the pain of hunger or the pain caused by a waste substance—an objective attainable through any [of these alternatives]—all [alternatives] would necessarily be equivalent, just as no fire is preferable to another fire since the objective in seeking warmth by fire is to eliminate the pain of cold. For we would say [in response] that this is false, for it is possible that one food is preferable to another food, despite the two being equivalent in their elimination of hunger, either because the unpalatable food causes pain by its taste, smell, appearance or associations, or because the excessive consumption of [a food] has resulted in boredom [with it], whereas the palatable food is characterised by the contrary of these attributes. So, of course, [we find] one food preferable to another, and one female sexual mate preferable to another.

It follows from what we have set out that the state most pervasive among people is either pain or the cessation of pain, and that pleasure that obtains as an existent quality over and above the cessation of pain occurs only in cases

59 See p. 73 above.

60 Al-Rāzī, *Sharḥ*, 2, pp. 547 ff.

so rare that they are like a drop in the ocean—for instance, the pleasures, as you mentioned, brought about by an image or a sound whose existence was unknown before they were perceived, and the like. As for pains, they are vastly abundant, although some are intensely severe, such as illnesses, while others are mild, and these are things that bear upon man most of the time, such as distress, anxiety, fear, trepidation, shame and anger, the pains that result from hunger, thirst, working in professions and trades, smelling foul smells, associating with obnoxious people, seeing repugnant things, the harms caused by flies, fleas, lice and ants, and all other things which are too many to enumerate and encompass.

Now that it has been established that pains are preponderant and that real pleasures are comparatively meagre, had the purpose of creating and bringing [the world] into being been these paltry pleasures—when the Creator knew that abundant pains would occur—[He] would have knowingly created a preponderant evil for the sake of a comparatively meagre good.⁶¹ It thereby becomes evident that their assertion, that the good is prevalent in this world, is false.

It cannot be argued that although illness is endemic, health is predominant. For we would say that this is a feeble [argument], because we have already shown that health is a privative state—namely, man's constantly being devoid of pleasure and pain—and this is not what we are currently discussing. If, however, it is said that the purpose of creating humans and other animals is to expose them to pains, then this would be downright evil; and it is not a view ever held by anyone. Should it be said, alternatively, that the purpose thereof is to make possible [for creatures] neither pleasure nor pain, we would say [in response] that this is not a sound motive for creating and bringing [the world] into being, because this [condition] would be equivalent [for creatures] to remaining in absolute non-existence. In fact, [the latter] would be the more favourable option; for just as one would not receive that meagre good, he would not suffer the preponderant evil. Remaining in non-existence is, therefore, the more favourable option.

3.2.8 [Again, for Avicenna, Evil Should Not Be a Problem]

At this impasse, you will find that critical investigators (*muḥaqqiq*) among the philosophers say, “The question, ‘Why did God create the world?’, is a question that seeks out a cause (*‘illa*), and as such it is vacuous; for God created the world through His essence, and not through a cause”. We say to them concern-

61 Reading *iltizām* for *ilzām*.

ing this: You have now admitted your true doctrine, which is that God is a cause through His essence. It would accordingly be wrong to ask, “Why does evil occur in His creatures?”; for what [is caused] through an essence cannot be explained through a different cause. What we mentioned at the start has by now become evident, namely that their discussion of this problem is superfluous, unless it is interpreted in either of the two aforementioned ways.⁶²

3.2.9 [Evil Is a Problem Only for the Mu‘tazila]

As for exponents of [the doctrine that the Creator is] a freely choosing agent, some deny that goodness and badness are rational, and say that all of God’s acts are rightly done and good.⁶³ So they too are exempt from this enquiry. However, those who subscribe to this [theory]—namely, the Mu‘tazila—maintain that the purpose of creation is to proffer benefits (*manāfi‘*), and it is fair to say that, [on this view,] the purpose cannot be to proffer this-worldly pleasures; for, relative to pains, they are like a drop in the ocean, as established earlier. It would be more plausible, rather, to postulate that the purpose is to proffer pleasures in the hereafter.

3.2.10 [A Personal Reflection]

The author Faḥr al-Dīn Muḥammad b. ‘Umar says:⁶⁴ For my part, for the overall wellbeing with which God has favoured me, so much so that I have been exceptional in this respect compared to most people, if I now return to myself and compare real pleasures—which is not to say, privative things—to both apparent and unapparent pains, as we set them out previously, I⁶⁵ find pleasures paltry in comparison to pains. This being the case, how could such pleasures be desired, when they are correlated to these pains! Had it not been for the great pleasures we hope [to attain] in the hereafter, continued non-existence would have been the preferable option.⁶⁶

62 See p. 76 above.

63 Mainly the Aṣ‘arīs, as mentioned earlier.

64 This was either written in by al-Rāzī himself, or added by a copyist. Some MSS add the *nisba* al-Rāzī and formulaic prayers.

65 Or “we”, according to some MSS.

66 This paper was delivered at “La réception de la notion avicennienne de la providence dans les différentes traditions musulmanes”, a seminar series organised at the CNRS by Meryem Sebti and Daniel De Smet, and at a workshop at LMU Munich. I am grateful for comments I received from the audience, Jari Kaukua, Michael Noble and an anonymous reviewer. I alone am responsible for the contents. This work was supported by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (Grant number AH/J000140/1).

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