

11 The Student and the Sage

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Plagued by the problem of evil, a student of philosophy and religion finds himself in great despair, with many more annoying questions than satisfying answers. The student passes by a certain ḥakīm, or sage, as he takes his usual route to his early morning philosophy of religion seminar. Drawn towards the sage's luminous presence, the student attempts to approach the old man.

Student: Salām 'alaykum.

Sage: 'Alaykum salām.

Student: Sir, are you new to the neighborhood?

Sage: No, no. I have been walking through this pathway every morning at 8 a.m. for the past 20 years. And I normally take refuge on that bench over there, which I call the "Ark of Noah."

Student: That's weird. I've been walking by here almost every morning at 8 a.m. also, at least for the past several years. How is it that I have never seen you?

Sage: Well, I have always been here, and have always seen you pass by.

Student: And you never said *salām*?

Sage: It would have been of no use.

Student: Uh, can I ask why?

Sage: Because you were not ready to see me.

Student: Please explain.

The sage looks up to the sun, then turns his gaze to the student.

Sage: Does a blind man see the sun?

Student: No, of course not.

Sage: Even though it is actually there?

Student: Yes, naturally.

Sage: But if the blind man could all of a sudden see, would he then see the sun?

Student: Yes!

Sage: So too is it the case with you. You were blind before, but now you can see, which is why we are talking to one another.

- Student:* So I can see now because I'm ready?
Sage: Yes.¹
Student: Ready for what, exactly, dear Sir? I still do not understand.
Sage: One of my brothers once said, "The arrival of Divine aid accords with readiness."²
Student: So I am now ready to receive God's help?
Sage: As ready as you can be at this current point along the curve of your life.
Student: I like the way you speak Sir, and I see that you have some special kind of knowledge.
Sage: I tend to think of it as the lack of a common kind of ignorance.
Student: Sure, whatever. I mean, you clearly know things that I don't, and I'd bet you know much more than most people.
Sage: That is because "people are asleep."³ The one who is not asleep is awake, and thus is more aware than those who are asleep.
Student: I see. So, what you have is an awareness, a wakefulness; it is a lack of sleep, and sleep corresponds to ignorance.
Sage: Whatever I have has been given to me as a gift from His Presence.⁴
Student: Sorry, but what did you do to gain this knowledge?

The sage shakes his head from left to right as he knocks at an invisible door.

- Sage:* All that one can ever do is knock with sincerity, fervor, and persistence. As the Master of the first and the last said, "If you keep knocking at the door, it is likely to be opened."⁵
Student: So sincerity is the key?
Sage: Yes, sincerity is like a key that can open the door to this knowledge. Fervor and persistence are like the act of opening that door.
Student: I must at least be a little ready for this knowledge that you have, right? I mean, you did say I am ready for "Divine aid."
Sage: Your sincerity is there. But you lack something that will impede you from progressing further.
Student: What is that? Sorry for asking . . .
Sage: Aspiration.

1 The preceding example derives from Suhrawardī's *The Reverberation of Gabriel's Wing*, for which, see Mohammed Rustom, "Storytelling as Philosophical Pedagogy: The Case of Suhrawardī," in *Knowledge and Education in Classical Islam: Religious Learning Between Continuity and Change*, ed. Sebastian Günther (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 1:404–416.

2 The brother in question is Ibn 'Aṭā' Allāh. See Ibn 'Ajība, *Īqāz al-himam fī sharḥ al-Ḥikam* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 1996), # 113.

3 Part of the Prophetic saying, "People are asleep; when they die, they awaken." See 'Ayn al-Qudāt, *The Essence of Reality: A Defense of Philosophical Sufism*, ed. and trans. Mohammed Rustom (New York: New York University Press, 2022), 99.

4 An allusion to Q 18:65.

5 See 'Ayn al-Qudāt, *Essence of Reality*, 177.

- Student:* But I do have aspiration. I often spend all night studying, reading, and reflecting. In fact, I am currently writing an essay which I hope to publish in an important peer-reviewed journal on the concept of grit in the religious life.
- Sage:* You indeed do have aspiration. But the arrow of your aspiration is set towards the wrong target. So, you always miss the mark.
- Student:* How do you know that?
- Sage:* Because it is a common phenomenon—I see it in many students of philosophy and religion. They have intelligence and sincerity of purpose for the most part. And they have a lot of desire and aspiration, but for the wrong thing.
- Student:* So, what is the right thing towards which I should aspire?
- Sage:* First you must tell me what it is that you want.
- Student:* I want to know God and the ways of God.
- Sage:* Well, if you sincerely seek to know God, you should aspire towards that.
- Student:* But I thought I do.
- Sage:* You do, in theory. But in practice it is something else.
- Student:* How can one practice to know God other than pray the daily prayers, perform litanies, read the Quran, follow the blessed Prophet, etc.?
- Sage:* That is how one should practice to come to know God. But it is more about the level of intensity of these actions. Have you not heard the noble verse? “Those who believe are more intense in their love for God.”⁶
- Student:* Aah, intensity in action. So, if I am more intense in my practices, I will come to know God, who is the object of my aspiration?
- Sage:* Perhaps.
- Student:* But if I just focus on action, will not my intelligence diminish?
- Sage:* That is what many think. If a person devotes himself to action, he becomes more intelligent, not less intelligent.
- Student:* I see. Conversely, if one devotes himself just to cultivating his intelligence without the corresponding action, he will be . . .
- Sage:* Less intelligent.
- Student:* Strange. I know some pretty smart guys who only write and think.
- Sage:* They cultivate what is known as “partial intelligence.” But the real intelligence of which I speak is more like intelligence with a capital “I”; that is, *Intelligence*.

With a puzzled look on his face, the student throws his hands to the sky.

- Student:* You distinguish between kinds of intelligence?
- Sage:* I do. Partial intelligence is good for all kinds of rational operations, and much of our world runs on it. But it is partial, which means it cannot see the big picture.
- Student:* And intelligence with a capital I?

- Sage:* It is like a light that shines from up above and illuminates the entirety of a dark room. Partial intelligence can only shed light on particular corners of that room, leaving many objects in it in obscurity.
- Student:* Why do people focus on partial intelligence instead of Intelligence?
- Sage:* The answer is simple. It is as Mawlana says:
“The partial intellect has given the Intellect a bad name.
Desire for the world has made man desire-less for God.”⁷
- Student:* Astounding! I think I understand what you are saying. I see a lot of intellectual know-how and mental acrobatics in my fields of study. And I am sad to say, I often see them in myself.
- Sage:* Of course. It is natural. The more a person focuses on his partial intelligence and seeks to cultivate it and make it the arbiter of all things, the more will his aspiration suffer.
- Student:* What then happens?
- Sage:* What normally happens is that he will aspire for the wrong things. He will, for example, continue to seek God, but not on God’s own terms. Rather, it will be on his own terms, in accordance with what his partial intelligence shows him to be real, important, and meaningful.
- Student:* Can you explain further?
- Sage:* One time a Friend of God was asked what religion he follows. He replied, “I follow the religion of my Lord.”⁸
- Student:* Interesting.
- Sage:* Everyone turns towards this direction or that direction. But the sincere ones have turned towards the direction of no direction.
- Student:* Is this what they also call the “Station of No Station”?⁹
- Sage:* Yes. Those who have gone to God and subsist in Him never return to any station, and are thus not bound by anything, much less the partial intellect.
- Student:* That must be a lovely place to be. I mean, one would never be bogged down by any kind of philosophical problem, for example.

The sage folds his arms, smiles, then looks off into the distance.

- Sage:* Philosophical and theological problems are problems insofar as they are seen from the perspective of the human. But from the perspective of the Divine, there are no problems as such.
- Student:* I wish they incorporated this vantage point into my philosophy and religion courses.

7 For these lines from Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī, see Mohammed Rustom, “The Ocean of Nonexistence,” *Mawlana Rumi Review* 4 (2013): 193.

8 The reference is to al-Ḥallāj. See Mohammed Rustom, *Inrushes of the Heart: The Sufi Philosophy of ‘Ayn al-Qudāt* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2023), 239.

9 For “the Station of No Station” in Sufism, see William Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-‘Arabī’s Metaphysics of Imagination* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1989), 375–381.

Sage: That would be a great benefit to human beings. As the Fourth Teacher¹⁰ says, “There is nothing more timely than the Timeless.”

Student: You know, Sir, there is a problem I’ve been having, a philosophical one, concerning what is known in philosophy of religion as the “problem of evil.” It would be interesting to see what you have to say about it.

With his right hand on his heart, the sage nods his head.

Sage: At your service.

Student: Thank you. It has kept me up for many nights. I can see very well what you mean about the partial intelligence. It seems that almost every approach to the problem I have seen has been from this perspective. The answers are never fully satisfactory . . .

Sage: How can they be fully satisfactory when they are partial answers? Insofar as a person operates at the level of the partial intelligence, he will be unable to truly address the problem of evil. Only the sages can really answer this question. Indeed, those going to God flee from evil, but those coming from Him move towards it.¹¹

Student: What did you mean by these last words?

Sage: This world we are in is the realm of evil, and so it is where evil is a problem. There are those who flee from the world and go towards God, with whom there is no evil. There are those who are with God and come back to the world of evil in order to help those stuck in it. Then there are those who are mired in this world of evil. With their feet firmly planted in the soil of the realm of evil, they try to solve the problem of evil. But a person mired in evil will never solve the problem of evil.

Student: It seems to me that you have already taken me in directions where I never thought this question can or perhaps should go. But explain why this problem of evil is not a problem for you. Is it because you are not “of” this world anymore?

The sage looks down for what seems like an eternity. Then he looks directly at the student with eyes resembling a vast ocean at dawn.

Sage: My place is the placeless, my trace the traceless, and my name the nameless. Going and coming are equal to me, and time and change do not define me.¹²

10 In Islamic philosophy, the First Teacher is Aristotle, the Second Teacher Fārābī, the Third Teacher Mīr Dāmād, and the Fourth Teacher Seyyed Hossein Nasr. See Sayyid Ḥasan Ḥusaynī, “Sayyid Ḥusayn Naṣr: Mu’allim-i chahārum,” *Iṭṭilā’āt-i ḥikmat wa-ma’rifat* 11, no. 11 (2017): 52–55.

11 Several of the sage’s following statements are taken from Mohammed Rustom, “Some Aphorisms on God, Evil, and Liberation,” *Sacred Web* 48 (2021): 147–149.

12 Cf. Maḥmūd Shabistarī, *Gulshan-i rāz*, ed. Javād Nūrbakhsh (Tehran: Khānaqāh-i Ni’mat Allāhī, 1976), line 9.

- Student:* So you are beyond the category of evil?
- Sage:* I would rather say that the sage sees no darkness and evil, for he beholds all things through the light of God.
- Student:* That is wonderful, and I wish I could someday see things the way you do. But you must surely acknowledge that evil is a real and live feature of the world that we live in. And I don't just mean lesser evils, but also horrendous evils, and what would seem like gratuitous evils.
- Sage:* Yes, of course: to deny the existence of evil on its own level is to deny the existence of the world on its own level. And on its own level, the world is real.
- Student:* But why then is there evil in this "real" world?
- Sage:* It is because of the infinity of God, or what some call His "all-possibility." God's all-possibility entails Self-negation, which entails manifestation, which entails separation, which entails evil.
- Student:* Oh, I know this argument well: God is all-good, and where He is not, there is evil. Since He is not in the world, evil is in the world.
- Sage:* Not quite. God is indeed "in" the world, but not by way of essential identification. Thus, the cosmos is not to be identified with God essentially. I once heard it said that God is not in the world per se; rather, the world is mysteriously plunged in Him.
- Student:* I don't quite get your point, sorry . . .
- Sage:* You say "sorry" too much. Be real in everything you say and do.
- Student:* Oh, sorry . . . I mean, thank you?
- Sage:* Say what is in your heart. "Never move around in the clothing of artificial formality."¹³
- Student:* Sorry. Agh! I mean, OK. Fine: I don't know what you mean.
- Sage:* Much better. God is not absent from the world. There is no place wherein God is absent. If that were so, then that place would not be a place. Every place is a place because of the presence of God within it. But there are varying degrees of presence, from the most intense (the Presence of God Himself) to other levels of intensity (ranging from scripture to the heart of the perfected human being), and then lesser levels of intensity (ranging from the cosmos to our world).
- Student:* But didn't the Proof of Islam¹⁴ say that our world is the best of possible worlds?
- Sage:* Ours is the best of possible worlds, but it is also the lowest of worlds.
- Student:* So you mean to say that God is present in the world, but not to the same degree that He is present in higher worlds?

13 These are the words of Khwāja Khurd. See William Chittick, *In Search of the Lost Heart: Explorations in Islamic Thought*, ed. Mohammed Rustom, Atif Khalil, and Kazuyo Murata (Albany: SUNY Press, 2012), 169.

14 A popular title for Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī.

- Sage:* Precisely. And it is to the degree that He is not “present” in this world that there is evil, which is a privation of good, as you have learned in your philosophy of religion classes.
- Student:* Yes, privation of good.
- Sage:* Now, that privation of good comes out of the infinite possibilities that belong to God, hence His infinity. Delimitation is one aspect of God’s infinity and perfection, which is why there is evil, since there are levels of delimitation vis-à-vis God’s perfection—and these levels are what constitute the cosmic order as we know it.
- Student:* I understand now. Thank you. Can I pick your brain with some more questions?
- Sage:* I hope you do not try to pick my brain. That would be painful. You mean, “May I further learn from you?”
- Student:* Yes. This is what I really meant.
- Sage:* This strange expression, “pick your brain,” presumes that knowledge is *in* the brain, thereby reducing the human act of knowing to a purely physical, even mechanical, process. But the kind of knowledge we are after is something quite different.
- Student:* Well, where is this knowledge that you have?
- Sage:* It is not in the brain, that is for certain. At the same time, it has a deep cognitive dimension; that, too, is certain. Yet it is also suprarational—depending on where a person is on the continuum along the upward scale of existence, this knowledge will be more or less deep. But the least of this kind of knowledge already corresponds to a stage beyond the intellect, as that great martyr of Hamadan has explained so well.¹⁵
- Student:* Would we call this special knowing faculty the heart?
- Sage:* Indeed. It is the heart, which is the seat of human consciousness and is in fact a manifestation of God, who is Pure Consciousness.
- Student:* So the less heart we have, the less awareness we have? And the less we perceive with the heart, the less will we be able to understand the problem of evil?
- Sage:* Yes.
- Student:* This really is helpful. You know, dear Sir, I took a course once on the silence of God. It drove me nuts! I always wondered how God could actually be silent. Of course, it is a much deeper problem than that, but it never quite sat well with me.
- Sage:* How could it? God is never silent since He is the Speaking; but we do not hear Him since we are never silent.
- Student:* It’s amazing how you are able to make such complicated ideas seem so simple.

15 That is, ‘Ayn al-Qudāt. See Rustom, *Inrushes of the Heart*, 149–153.

Sage: It is amazing how you are able to make such simple ideas seem so complicated!¹⁶

The student laughs out loud, with a smile from ear to ear.

Student: And you have a sense of humor! It really is a pleasure to meet you. Can I ask another question?

Sage: Yes.

Student: Why could the world simply not have evil in it?

Sage: Because it would then not be the world.

Student: Huh?

Sage: To ask for a world without evil is to ask for another kind of world. But to ask for another kind of world is to ask for another kind of cosmic configuration which would exclude the presence of freedom, since freedom is unique to our current cosmic configuration.

Student: I get it. Human freedom is the cause of much evil. But what about accidental evils? Why are they present in our world?

Sage: Because they are in the nature of things. After all, fire burns by virtue of the same property that it warms.¹⁷

Student: Of course! And there is no pure evil in the world, right?

Sage: Yes. Nothing in the cosmos is pure evil, for pure evil is absolute non-existence, just as pure goodness is absolute existence.

The student begins nodding his head in approval and lets out a sigh of grief.

Student: I have to go to my class now. Will I see you again?

Sage: I do not know. God-willing, we will meet again.

Student: You do not know whether you will come here tomorrow, or whether I will come here? I can be here any time you like . . .

Sage: I do not dwell in the past, nor do I look to the future. I live in the Now. The present moment and death are the only guarantees we have.

Student: And don't forget income taxes!

Both men look at each other and laugh audibly.

Student: Well, I hope for the sake of my poor soul that I can see you again. Please give me some parting advice.

Sage: Pull back the veil of evil in order to truly live.

Student: Aha! I knew it would not be that easy. An explanation would be very helpful.

16 The student's observation and the sage's response paraphrase a famous exchange between Ṣadr al-Dīn al-Qūnawī and Rūmī, with the former corresponding to the student and the latter the sage.

17 An allusion to a statement made by Avicenna. See Avicenna, *The Metaphysics of the Healing*, trans. Michael Marmura (Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 2005), IX.6, § 16.

The sage and the student start to walk together, towards the arch at the end of the pathway.

Sage: Well, when we “pull back” the spelling of the word *evil*, that is, reverse it, we get the word *live*. Evil is a *veil* since it veils true life, just as the spelling of the word *evil* conceals the fact that it contains a veil: through the transposition of the “e” and the “v,” we get the word *veil*, as it is made of the same stuff as the word *evil*, both substantially and linguistically. On the substantial side of things, we must transcend the veil of evil and see beyond it, which is where true life begins.

Student: Where true life begins. Where true life begins . . .

Lost in his thoughts, the student looks up only to find that the presence of the sage is now replaced by a sweet fragrance that is as strangely familiar as it is otherworldly.

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