God, Cosmos, and Humanity: Muslim Perspectives on Divine Providence

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Consider this famous set of pronouncements concerns the nature of God, divine providence, and the human yearning for God and their inability to grasp God's transcendence:

Praise is God's whom speakers cannot eulogise, and whose bounties cannot be enumerated by those counting, nor can one give Him His due despite the attempts of those striving to do so; the heights of intellectual endeavour cannot perceive Him, nor can the depths of understanding fathom Him. No standard can be established to describe Him, nor praise, neither in space nor in time that encompasses Him. He originated creatures through His power, dispersed the wind with His mercy, and fixed His trembling earth with rocks.

The beginning of the faith is acknowledging Him, the perfection of acknowledging Him is bearing witness to Him, the perfection of bearing witness to Him is belief and making Him One, the perfection of making Him One is sincere faith in Him, the perfection of sincere faith in Him is

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negating attributes of Him, because every attribute is recognisably distinct from what it attributes and what is attributed is conceptually distinct from the attribute. Whoever describes God ascribes a like to Him, and whoever ascribes a like to Him makes Him two, and whoever makes Him two divides Him into parts

A being but not after becoming, an existent but not after being privative, with everything without being identical to them, unlike everything without being distinct from them, acting without movement or instrument, seeing even though there is nothing in creation that gazes upon Him, absolutely One such that there is none that keeps Him company nor anyone whom He may miss in his absence. (al-Raḍī 2015, 39–40)¹

This was uttered by ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭālib, the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet Muḥammad (and the first Imam in the Shiʿi tradition) in a sermon from his time as caliph on the creation and the nature of God. They reflect the creative tension between the transcendence and immanence of God in the Islamic context; either the former can be stressed to the extent that causality is denied to other than God in an occasionalist cosmos as envisaged in the Sunnī Ashʿarī theological traditions, or the latter may be emphasized such that the mediation of ‘divine humanity’ is expressed in the worship and adoration of the mediating friends of the divine as one finds in the Nuṣayrī-ʿAlawī traditions. If God were so utterly unknowable, how could humans make sense of their cosmos, their purpose, and even understand God’s purpose, wisdom, and theodicy? Similarly, if God were fully human, how could one understand the suffering of the divine within a world that suffers? This relatively short text could in itself become the basis for a theological reflection on the relationship between what Islam’s sapiential traditions calls the three realities of God, the microcosmic human that is both the face of the divine and the reflection, the mirror, of the cosmos back to God, and the cosmos that manifests the signs of God in the horizons. Insofar as divine providence calls for humans to make sense of God, it nudges us toward both the horizons of the cosmos and the depths of our own souls so that we may know that ‘He is the Real’

¹ Al-Raḍī (d. 1016), himself a descendent of the Prophet and ʿAlī, compiled this work, *Nahj al-balāgha* on literary parameters to collect the sermons, homiletic sayings and letters of ʿAlī. The gendered pronoun for God accords to the grammatical normativity of the masculine in Arabic, and some might assume that the male is privileged in Islam but there is also a gendered complementarity, the yin-yang in the famous postulation of Sachiko Murata 1992, between the divine names of majesty and of beauty, the masculine and the feminine.

(Qur'an 41.53). One might even describe this as a phenomenological approach to the question of divine providence, human purpose, and theodicy. I will return to this. The purpose of this article is neither to provide a thick interpretation of a singular text nor to focus on the occasionalism that is often found in discussions of Islamic theological positions on providence (reflecting a *Sunnī* normativity) but rather to show ways in which Islam(s) are claimed in different theological contexts and philosophical accounts given for divine providence and theodicy.

One of my critical points is the plurality of Muslim voices, of interpretations on scriptural and rational grounds to understand the three realities. One key desideratum of the contemporary field of Islam (within religious studies) is to decolonize our ways of understanding by critiquing not only the master narratives of what Islam is and is not (that arise from the orientalist practice) but also to provincialize notions of the 'Islamic' by emphasizing the plurality of voices, claims, and contestations within the house of Islam historically. This involves a re-centering and re-presenting philosophies and rationalist theologies from the margins as well as taking seriously those doctrinal and hermeneutical positions not associated with hegemonic forms of *Sunnī* Islam, either in their historical or modern forms. The case of how the nature of God is understood and related to the nature of the cosmos and its nurture and development is a useful topic for that decolonization.

The Hellenic concept of providence (*πρόνοια*) as God's plan for creation, God's continuing care for creation and a theodicy to explain evil was quickly naturalized in Islamic thought by philosophers and theologians, mainly through the influence of Proclus (d. 485). Providence became a site for contestations within philosophies and theologies and scriptural exegesis, of engaging God's plan, understanding the human condition, and the problem of evil and suffering. What exactly is the function of divine providence? What does it help us to understand? Does it account for the problem of evil? Is there an incommensurability between these accounts and the broader theological accounts of the relationship between God, cosmos, and humanity and what we wish to understand in our contemporary age? I shall begin with a brief account of an Islamic system of metaphysics, cosmology, the nature of moral obligation, and eschatological implications that arise from scriptural and early canonical texts in order to provide a wider frame for the discussion of providence. One 'scriptural' model will be presented for understanding Islam and

providence. I will examine two philosophical models for understanding divine providence: the first is the philosophers' account in Avicenna/Ibn Sīnā (d. 1037) in which providence explains how and why creation comes about and how we can explain the existence of evils and the significant mediation of prophecy as an expression of providence and God's facilitating grace; the second is the Safavid account of Mullā Ṣadrā Shīrāzī (d. 1636) and his theodicy of divine love. I cannot imagine that we can solve the problem of providence and evil once and for all, but I hope that we can understand the questions more adequately and some of the historical solutions.

10.1 WHAT IS ISLAM? OR INFERRING PROVIDENCE FROM SCRIPTURE

I present a model for how we might understand Islam as a holistic way of life, an imaginative metaphysics, praxis, and affective community, a *dīn* as it is described in the Qur'ān (Q. 3.19: truly the religion [*dīn*] in the sight of God is submission [*islām*]),² as a religion in the term that we often use. While I recognize that the totality of the conceptual language used in the study of religion and indeed in philosophy of religion depends upon a normative basis in the study of Christianity, one needs to be aware of how elastic the concepts of theology, mysticism, religion, dogma, even providence and scripture might be. Here, I will use *dīn* instead of "religion" because it is a central term in Islamic discursive traditions. There are two ways of understanding *dīn*: the first focuses on etymology, the second focuses on antonyms. On the former, a number of possibilities are put forward: *dīn* derives from the Arabic root d-y-n which connotes mutual obligation and debt and stems from the idea that it is the response and relationship to God that is morally entailed by the recognition of God as creator and sustainer of the cosmos, a notion known in Islamic theological traditions as *taklīf* (moral obligation) (Frank 1983). A related sense of the same root is that of judgment (e.g., the Qur'an talks of God as the 'Master of the day of judgement' (*dīn*) 1.4), of paying one's dues for the accumulation of one's actions (Q. 24.25: 'on that day, God will pay them their just due in full'). The terms "urbanity", "civility", and "being human" come from the same root and *dīn* connotes these senses as well. Thus, *dīn*

² All translations are taken from Nasr et al. 2015, here 135.

concerns the civil and affective ways in which we live our humanity through what we owe to God and to each other.

On the other hand, *dīn* is not *dunyā*. While much recent ink has been spilled on the implications on this distinction for the religious-secular divide and for an understanding of divine and human sovereignty and indeed of political theology in modern Islam, there is little quibbling that mutuality of *dīn* with the world and intimacy of our attachments that arise from embodiment remains such that the two cannot be truly distinct insofar as they construe facets of our humanity. *Dīn* is thus as complex a term as any used in any culture that might be classed under the term ‘religion’. For our purposes, one point worth bearing in mind is how one might distinguish *dīn* and its propositional and ethical commitments to philosophy (insofar as, following Pierre Hadot (1993, 1995), it is a way of life and a set of spiritual practices as well); for many of the thinkers in the Islamic traditions that I will consider, the distinction is not categorical or essential but a matter of degree ranging from perhaps ‘philosophical religions’ to ‘religious philosophies’ (Fraenkel 2012; Corbin 1972).

The scriptural model for understanding Islam and divine providence is based on a purported saying of the Prophet and references the Qur’an as the privileged signifier in theological reasoning. It provides a metaphysical explanation of the relationship between the three realities of God, the cosmos, and humanity, and puts forward understandings of the way in which the human acts as a mirror of the divine, as a microcosm through which one can infer the creative agency of the divine and the divine’s sustaining relationship, as well as the cosmos as a mirror, as a macrocosm in which one understands God’s existence and providential care for the cosmos and humanity.

The famous hadith of Gabriel describes the three dimensions of Islam—*īmān* (faith), *islām* (acts), and *ihsān* (virtue or making beautiful) (Nawawī n.d., 4–6).³ The story is set in the mosque of the Prophet. An unknown young man comes and asks the Prophet three things and then asks him about the portents of the hour (to indicate the eschatological and soteriological significance of understanding these three dimensions); once he’s left, the Prophet turns to his companions and says, ‘That was Gabriel who

³The text is found in numerous sources such as the *Jāmi‘ al-Ṣaḥīḥ* of al-Bukhārī (d. 870) (*Jāmi‘ al-ṣaḥīḥ*, *Kitāb al-īmān* hadith §50, I: 36–37) and Muslim b. al-Ḥajjāj al-Nīsābūrī (d. 875) (*Jāmi‘ al-ṣaḥīḥ*, *Kitāb al-īmān* hadith §1, I: 36–38).

came to teach you your *dīn*'. The three questions constitute the three dimensions of Islam as a *dīn*.

What is *islām*?

Islām is that you testify that there is no deity but God and that Muḥammad is his messenger, that you establish and perform the prayer, that you give alms, that you fast the month of Ramaḍān, and that you perform the pilgrimage to the house of God if you have the means to do so.

"Islām" is used in different senses in the scriptural traditions from submission, to the primordial faith and to the specific historical religious dispensation of Muḥammad. Here it indicates what a Muslim ought to do given their assent to God's existence and creation and his communication to humanity through the Prophet. It is the Prophet who teaches humans how to fulfill what they owe to God in terms of ritual prayers, fasting, alms, and pilgrimage. In the Shi'i context, the list of 'five pillars' is different: prayer, fasting, alms, pilgrimage, and the *walāya* of the Imams who succeed the Prophet (al-Kulaynī 1972, II: 18–24). *Walāya* is the continuation of the mediating role of the Prophet and the recognition that in every age there must be a proof (*ḥujja*) for the existence of God, a protector of the Prophetic mission who guides humanity in their performance of what they owe God and indeed it is the recognition of their rank with God that gives meaning to the performance of those ritual acts and moral obligations that enact what is owed. God's commissioning of the prophets and the Imams as mediators is an expression of divine providence and care for humanity and for the cosmos, in order that humans may realize their true nature through their acts of piety.

What is *īmān*?

Īmān is that you believe and trust in God, his angels, her prophets, and the afterlife, and believe and trust in the divine measuring, both the good and the bad.

The scope of faith concerns those truth claims about God, the cosmos, divine providential communication of revelation and commission of prophetic missions, and the compensation in the afterlife as well as the fact that God creates what is good and what is evil and decrees the good and bad that befall humans in terms of moral and natural evils and goods. The

mention of prophets in the plural and of angels indicates that revelation and God's communication to humanity is a continuous process from the beginning of humanity; the faith that the term Islam connotes therefore is a primordial one and hence previous Biblical prophets and extra-Biblical messengers are part of the same unfolding of God's plan for humanity. Significantly here is the mention of trust in God's 'measure' (or destiny as some would put it) with both elements of divine provision, the good and the bad. In a sense this is a tradition-based notion that divine providence leads to belief and trust even when things seem bad and suffering challenges our good opinion and comfort in God.

What is *iḥsān*?

Iḥsān is that you worship God as if you see God; and if you do not see God, know that God sees you.

This is the most important element for the spiritual traditions and has been much beloved of Sufis who find in this term the essence of their practice that goes beyond the moral obligations of the practice of the *dīn*. Acting and living in the presence of the divine as a comfort and as a guide to one's moral being lies at the heart of the notion of a spiritual path from and to God, of the desire to do and act for the best in the world, and especially to beautify one's world; the aesthetic element of life should not be ignored here and often explains the artistic impulses in and around the practice of 'religion'. Taken together this three-dimensional approach constitutes a popular providential account for the why, how, whence, and whither of the *dīn*.

10.2 AVICENNA: DIVINE CREATIVE AGENCY AND THE MEDIATION OF THE PROPHET

Avicenna's theodicy is predicated on the Neoplatonic notion that providence concerns the intelligible design and order of the cosmos, God's creation and production of the good, and God's satisfaction with the best of all possible worlds (Ibn Sīnā 2005, 339; Inati 2000, 128). Providence concerns God's care for the cosmos or lesser beings such as us through the mediation of prophecy. Following the Proclean tradition, metaphysical (or essential) evil is a privation that is entailed by the lower status of matter as passivity and the source of discord (Inati 2000, 67–81). Moral evils, on

the other hand, are accidental and existent, partly arising out of the fact of our embodiment:

This existing apprehended thing is not evil in itself but in connection with this thing. As for the thing's lack of perfection and wholeness, this is not an evil simply in relation to [the thing] such that [this imperfection] would have an existence that is not an evil for [that thing]. Rather, its very existence is nothing but an evil in it, and in the [very] manner of its being an evil. For blindness can be only in the eye; and, inasmuch as it is in the eye it can only be an evil, having no other aspect in terms of which it would be an evil. As for heat, if, for example, it becomes an evil relative to the sufferer from it, it has another aspect in terms of which it is not an evil. 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. Accidental evil [on the other hand] is the non-existent, or that which keeps perfection away from that which deserves it. (Ibn Sīnā 2005, 340)

Thus, (relative, broadly moral) evil is an accidental existence, as we see in this preceding discussion from the *Metaphysics of the Healing* (*al-Ilāhīyāt min al-Shifā'*), book IX, chapter 6 on 'providence, showing the manner of the entry of evil in divine predetermination'. But he also mentions one important point that was raised in the Neoplatonic tradition, and as we shall see, was addressed by Mullā Ṣadrā, namely that there is on balance more good than evil in the cosmos because humans have free will as rational agents to choose to act and because often evils are relative entities that a good soul may choose with good intentions to good ends (Ibn Sīnā 2005, 341–42, tr. Inati 2014, 133, 144–58). This best of all possible worlds could not be otherwise even if we may conceive of a perfection existence that is devoid of evil. Avicenna states:

This is not permissible in the likes of this pattern of existence, even though it is permissible in absolute existence as being one mode that is free from evil, which, however, is not this mode. This mode is among the things that have emanated from the First Governor and hence have [come] to exist in intellectual, psychological, and celestial things. This other mode, would, then remain in the realm of the possible. Refraining from bringing it into existence would not have been the same as in the case of that which exists because of what may be mixed with it by way of evil [that is such] that, if its principle did not exist to begin with, and [if the existence] of this evil is left out, this would result in a greater evil than it, so that its existence is the bet-

ter of two evils. Moreover, if this mode were not confined to the realm of possibility, it would then follow necessarily that the good causes prior to the causes leading accidentally to evil would not exist. For the existence of [the former causes] renders the others consequential on them. In this there would be the greatest fault in the universal order of the good. (Ibn Sīnā 2005, 343; see also Inati 2000, 147)

Avicenna therefore establishes a typology. Metaphysical evils are privative and derive from being a receptacle of matter and possibility, as well as dynamic realities that are necessary for the production and completion of the cosmos as it is. Moral evils are more relative and accidental, even contextual, some of which arise out of the desire of an evil soul afflicted by ignorance and inordinate concern for the pleasures of the flesh, and others out of the desire of a godly soul that intends the best.

Avicenna further addresses providence and the problem of evil at the end of *namaṭ* VII of his *Pointers and Reminders* (*al-Ishārāt wa'l-tanbīhāt*). Providence for him is God's knowledge of the whole cosmos (partly resolving the problem of God's knowledge of particulars) and its order and that knowledge is the producer of the good in the cosmos (Ibn Sīnā 2002, 333).

Remark

Things that are contingent in existence (*al-umūr al-mumkina fī'l-wuǧūd*) include [1] things whose existence can be altogether free from evil, deficiency, and corruption; [2] things that cannot give their advantages except if they are such that a certain evil proceeds from them at the jamming of motions and the clashing of movable things. Further, in the division there are also [3] things that are evil either absolutely or for the most part (*immā 'alā l-itlāq wa-immā bi-ḥasab al-jalaba*).

If pure benefit is the principle of the emanation of good existence and befitting existence, then the existence of the first division must necessarily emanate, such as the existence of the intellectual substances and the like. Also, the second division must necessarily emanate. This is because in the privation of abundant good (*ḥayr kaṭīr*) and in the nonproduction of it, as a precaution against slight evil, there is great evil, illustrated by the creation of fire; for fire would not give its advantages and would not complete its assistance in perfecting existence unless it is such that it harms and hurts whatever animal bodies happen to collide with it. The same is true of animal bodies. They cannot have their advantages unless they are such that it is possible [A] for their states in their motions and rests, as is the case with the states of fire also, to lead to the coming together of clashes that harm; [B]

for their states and the states of things in the world to lead to the occurrence of error from them in the knotting of harm for the afterlife and for the truth; or [C] for an excess of an acting predominant agitation, such as desire or anger that harms the possibility of the afterlife. The above-mentioned powers [such as fire] do not enjoy their richness unless they are such that accidental error and predominant agitation occur to them on the occasion of clashes. This is so in individuals that are fewer than those who are safe and at times fewer than those of safety. Because this is known in the prior providence, it is as if intended incidentally. Thus, evil enters the divine measuring (*al-qadar*) incidentally (*bīl-ʿaraḍ*), as if it were, for example, pleasing [to God] incidentally. (Ibn Sīnā 2002, 333–35, tr. Inati 2014, 177–78)

Note evil accidentally pertains to the divine measuring or destiny (*qadr*) and not to the divine decree (*qadāʾ*); the latter concerns the divine realm of eternity while the former measures out what exists in the sub-lunary, temporal world of generation and corruption. The second division of contingents that are mixtures of good and evil must exist for the good to be done (Ibn Sīnā 2002, 336–37, tr. Inati 2014, 180). This is because of the erotic motion of the cosmos (as articulated in Avicenna’s *Risālat al-ʿishq*), a point that Mullā Ṣadrā picks up when he argues that God decrees that all existents—whether intelligible, psychic, sensible, or natural—have ingrained within them a desire for perfection and movement toward completing the perfection appropriate to them; all these contingents lack perfection as such from their inception but all have the potentiality and the disposition to love and desire it and recognize the one who is higher in the hierarchy of being who can help them fulfill it (Šīrāzī 2004, VII: 197).

The account of how this providence provides for us as individuals takes us to the last chapter of his *Metaphysics* and the account of prophecy in which the prophet is a mediating figure, without whom nothing can be fulfilled or come to its full realization. Providence ensures that the act of grace and mercy that is the mediating prophet is available for humanity and the cosmos at large. The human mediation of the prophet and his historical contingency and particularity is also what ensures providence is particularized and not just universal, and reflects the specific care that God has for believers as well as the totality of humanity and the cosmos. God’s providence does not leave humanity remote from divine transcendence but ensures a link through the ‘divine humanity’ of the prophet.

10.3 MULLĀ ṢADRĀ ON PROVIDENCE, EVIL, AND LOVE

We now turn to the Shi'ī thinker Mullā Ṣadrā Shīrāzī (d. 1636). Providence pertains both to cosmological and epistemological approaches to understanding the nature of reality. It also provides a structured and ordered way of considering the question of why there is something rather than nothing and how things in phenomenal reality relate to one another hierarchically and how they seek their principle through the motivation of love. First, it might be worth contextualizing Mullā Ṣadrā's theodicy within the structure of his magnum opus *The Transcendent Philosophy of the Four Journeys of the Intellect* (*al-Ḥikma al-muta'āliya fī l-Asfār al-'aqliya al-arba'a*). The third 'journey' on theology proper is divided into 'stopping-points' (*mawāqif*) of which there are ten: the first provides the proof for the existence of God drawing upon the Avicennian tradition; the second considers the broad issue of the divine names and attributes; stopping-points III–VIII consider the 'essential' divine attributes such as omniscience (*'ilm*, where the problem of God's knowledge of particulars is broached as well as his solution based on the identity thesis and presential knowledge), omnipotence (*qudra*), life (that God is *ḥayy*), perceiving and ever watchful (that God is *samī'* and *baṣīr*), and God's revelation and speech (that God is *mutakallim*). Stopping-points nine and ten pertain to extensions of providence: the former relates to the nature of the emanation of existence from God and the way in which the chain of being is related through the principle of 'nobler contingency' (*imkān ašraf*), and the latter is on the continuous care and munificence of the divine in the order of being as an expression of God's sempiternal power (*azaliyat qudratihi*).

At the beginning of *Mawqif* VIII on providence, Mullā Ṣadrā provides this crucial definition:

There is no doubt that the Necessary Existence is the perfection of reality and above perfection, as is the case with some of the cherubim, the holy intellects perfect in their essences with their very ipseities conjoined with the True One. They do not do what they do out of purpose for what is below them in this cosmos. In sum, it is not proper for the higher causes to emanate actions purposes that would return those actions to them based on motivations prior to the act. If they were not perfect in word and essence but rather deficient relying for their perfection in a sense upon their effects, then this would be highly impossible. It is established that they do not have

a care for their actions nor any motivation that propels them nor any need that intervenes in their essences or a will additional to them; they are only led by the highest good and the loftiest most perfect light.

As for the True One, there is no purpose above him to which he looks for the effusion of the good and the radiance of the comprehensive mercy. In fact we witness in the existents of this cosmos and the parts of the order and the individuals of things—especially the flora and fauna, even in the universal archetypes among the spheres and the celestial principles—the beauty of governance and the generosity of hierarchy and the care for the optimal and the beneficial and the creation of powers and causes inclined to ends, repelling afflictions and corruptions. One cannot bear to deny the wondrous effects in the particulars of things, so how can one deny them of their universals?

Providence is the being of the One knowing through his essence what is in existence in the greatest good and the perfect order and being a cause through his essence of the good and of perfection to the greatest extent possible, and being pleasing. These three meanings—knowledge, causation and being pleasing—together constitute what providence means, all of them being his very essence, in the sense that his essence is knowledge of the order of the good and the same as the perfect cause for that order and the same as the pleasure from it—this is the eternal desire. His essence by his essence is the form of the order of the good in the loftiest and most noble sense because the True Being has no purpose, no limit in perfection beyond him. As it is so, then one can intellect the order of the good in the most complete form in the order and its perfection in contingency, so what one intellects as an order and as a good is emanated from Him.

This is the meaning of providence unadulterated by doubt and imperfection. Whoever believes otherwise such as those who claim that all is by chance as it attributed to some of the ancients or such as those who claim that the divine will is free of wisdom and end as is attributed to al-Ash‘arī or such as those who claim that there is a lowly end reverting to the creation, they have all been led far astray and are ignorant of the transcendence and simplicity of God the exalted: ‘They do not consider God as is his due’ (Q. 6:91). (Šīrāzī 2004, VII: 81–83)

Here one finds the definitions of providence already found in Proclus and Avicenna that stress why creation cannot be motivated by God’s desire for what is ontologically lesser and how providence captures the intelligent design, the creative causation, and the satisfaction with the cosmos on the part of God. The stress in this passage upon divine wisdom (and not a possible desire for what is lower) for creating a providential order in the

cosmos as it exists, is further glossed in five short chapters that are replete with scriptural citations in the middle of *Mawqif* VIII (Šīrāzī 2004, VII: 146–96). These chapters rehearse elements of cosmological and teleological arguments for the existence of God. Central is the discussion of the creation of the human in the most base of form as pure potentiality and matter but placing within that base thing a potentiality and disposition to seek perfection and perfect itself, drawing upon his principle of ‘substance in motion’ such that the human can be the best of the cosmos and its most noble aspect (Šīrāzī 2004, VII: 173–80). This is a deliberate play upon a reversal of the Qur’anic formula in *sūrat al-ṭīn* (Q. 95.4–5): ‘verily we created the human in the best of form (*aḥsan al-taqwīm*), then we rendered him into the lowest of the low (*asfal al-sāfilīn*).’⁴

In a critical chapter on the principle that the sensible and intelligible worlds are both created in the best of forms possible, Mullā Ṣadrā says:

The Necessary Being (*wāǧib al-wuǧūd*) is the god of this cosmos (*ilāh al-‘ālam*) dissociated from any manner of deficiency, his existence is his essence and his reality is the most excellent of the modes of existence and the most perfect one (*wuǧūduhu alladī huwa dātuhu wa-ḥaqīqatuhu afdal anḥā’ al-wuǧūd wa-atammuhā*). In fact, his is the reality of existence and its quiddity. All save him is a ray and spark or shadow of him

God knows everything other than Himself in the best manners because the knowledge-forms of things are His very essence. Things, therefore, have divine knowledge-forms before their actual existence, and these forms have a divine sacred existence. Whatever is a divine being is of necessity the most beautiful and magnificent (*fī ḡāyat al-ḥusn wa-l-bahā’*). When the similitudes (*mithāl*) of these forms are actualized in the world of generation [and corruption] (*‘ālam al-kawn*), they must necessarily be the most magnificent and noble of what can be in the world of generation [and corruption]. (Šīrāzī 2004, VII: 142–44)

The supra-perfection and goodness of God and his non-teleological provision of existence and goodness constitute providence that is not self-ish (Šīrāzī 2004, VII: 81). Divine providence requires each entity to arrive at its own perfection and the path that it may take is through prior shortcomings and ‘evils’.

⁴For example, see Šīrāzī 2004, VII: 172–73, citing Q. 23.14, 40.67, and 76.1–2 on the way in which God’s providential and wise creation of the human fluctuates between the two ends of the most base and the most perfect.

An explanation that exists that reverts and actual beings in the ranks of ascent in this world of composition are the most bountiful and in the most excellent order.

The order of actualized things in this world pertains to the motions of the spheres and their positions and the order of the spheres is a shadow of the order of the world of the divine decree which as you have learned is the most perfect and complete. As it has been repeated and realized, these existents do not emanate by coincidence and by chance ... nor by way of an arbitrary will ... nor due to an incomplete will or an additional motive ... nor due to nature or a consciousness that it has in its essence above its consciousness upon which it was emanated as the filthiest of materialists and atheists hold. Rather, the rational order which the philosophers call providence emanates from this existing order and it is the best and most excellent possible. (Šīrāzī 2004, VII: 150)

Everything in this order is necessary and natural to its disposition and neither arbitrary nor coincidental or by chance. Goodness in this sense is not the rational good of moral acts whose opposite is evil. Because the One is perfection and glory and ecstasy and pure light, everything is geared toward it especially since they are contaminated by evils. For Mullā Ṣadrā, evil as such, following the Neoplatonists, constitutes a privation in the essence of the thing or a privation or absence of perfection in a thing. Therefore, in itself, evil is privative even though we conceive of it as existent. He concludes the basic definition in this syllogistic form: If evil were an ontological thing, then evil would not be evil. Since the subsequent is false, therefore the antecedent is as well (Šīrāzī 2004, VII: 85–86). But what of those things that we consider to be evil such as death and ignorance and grief and pain and so forth? These are of two kinds, the first pertain directly to the one affected and harmed in the form of moral evils, and the latter are indirectly affected such as the clouds blocking the sun from benefiting us. Mullā Ṣadrā is more concerned with the former. They are so with respect to what the intellect and religion dictate (*al-damm al-ʿaqlī wa-l-sharʿī*) but in and of themselves they are not evil. Mullā Ṣadrā says:

The condemned moral characters that prevent human souls from reaching their intellectual perfection, like avarice, cowardice, wastefulness, pride, and vanity, and such wicked acts as injustice, wrongful killing, adultery, theft, calumny, defamation, obscenity, and the like, are not evil in themselves but rather states of goodness emanating from being (*al-khayrāt al-wujūdīya*).

They are [states of] perfections for natural entities and animal or vegetative powers that we find in the human. Their evilness is only in comparison to a higher and nobler power which, in its perfection, has command over the disobedient and noncompliant powers under it. (Šīrāzī 2004, VII: 88–89)⁵

In fact, some of the passions can be a good thing—we consider anger to be a negative trait and a passion. But insofar as it reflects the wrath of God it can be a good. Similarly, desire can be an evil if it leads one to fornication; but it is a good if it propels the soul toward what is better and acts as an erotic motivation (Šīrāzī 2004, VII: 140). He contends at the end of that discussion that there is nothing that is purely in existence or in the good that is condemnable, but it can only be considered so in a relative manner. What this raises is the distinction between two senses of evil: ontological evil or what we normally call *šarr*, and a rational consideration of moral acts that are called *qubḥ*.

Similarly, in his discussion of the meaning of the bounty of God in his exegesis of *sūrat al-Fātiḥa*, Mullā Ṣadrā considers a relative and perspectival approach to the question of good and evil. He begins by arguing that one can divide goods into those that are affected by themselves, those that are affected by another, and those that are affected by both themselves and others. An example of the first is the pleasure that arises from contemplating God and the felicity of meeting God. An example of the second is money because it is a means to something else. An example of the third is health. The second and the third must contain within the bounty and good a deficiency and an evil. From another perspective, he says that goods are of three types: beneficial, beautiful, and pleasurable. The first of these is ultimately useful, the second of these is good in all states, and the third is fleeting. Similarly, evils can be divided into harmful, ugly, and painful. Both good and evil are further divided into the absolute and the limited, with the former covering all three possibilities. An absolute good is knowledge which is beneficial, beautiful, and pleasurable. An absolute evil is compounded ignorance because it is harmful, ugly, and painful. However, on the limited side, we can have various compositions. For example, you can have something that is beneficial but painful such as the amputation of a diseased finger, or something which is beneficial but ugly such as stupidity because the stupid person feels contented (Šīrāzī 2010, I: 159–60). Similar to the latter case, in his exegesis on *Sūrat Yāsīn* is his

⁵ See Kalin 2007, 199.

contention that something such as a satanic whispering may be a good in the here and now because it might be pleasurable but is an evil in the after-life because acting in accordance leads to negative effects there (Šīrāzī 2010, VII: 362, 612).

Critical to Mullā Ṣadrā's notion that this is the best of all possible worlds with its mixture of perfections and imperfections in phenomenal reality is his notion of monism and the simple reality of the divine that is manifest in the role of the microcosmic human as the simple reality that brings all together. The totality of the cosmos as a singular person is the one thing that emanates from the True One; however, one can also consider the totality of the cosmos to be hierarchically arranged and gradually created as well. This goes to the heart of Mullā Ṣadrā's view of how the cosmos is contingent as a whole and a logical product of God but also in a process of gradually being created:

If you were to claim:

If the cosmos in its totality—I mean the macroanthropos (*al-insān al-kabīr*)—is one person who is the noblest of contingent beings because the cause of its instauration and the cause of its perfection is one thing, namely the Truth, then we would claim: this judgement applies to the first effect and in reality it applies to its similitude, therefore it follows that from the True One two things emanate which is impossible. It also entails that the existence of the two are of one species above the level of [the world of] generation [and corruption] and that also opposes the principle of philosophy.

Its refutation is that from that it does not follow that there is multiplicity in reality, as we have previously verified that the perfection of the reality of a thing can only pertain to the level of its distant differentia which is the form in which all of its features are constituted. And you know that the thing in its form is that very thing and not in its matter. What emanates from the Truth is one thing which is the macroanthropos in its very personhood, but it can be considered in two senses—a holistic one and a more detailed one. And the only difference between these two modes of consideration is the mode of perception and not the actual thing perceived. If you consider the totality of the cosmos insofar as it is a simple reality you will judge that it emanates from the true One in a singular emanation and a simple instauration (*ḡa'lan basīṭan*). And if you consider its detailed features one by one then you judge that what emanates from Him first is the most noble of its parts and the most perfect of its constituents which is the first intellect; since the intellect is all things—as has been mentioned—then all remaining things one by one are a hierarchy of nobler and nobler and more perfect and more

perfect and similarly towards the more base in existence and the more weak in it [existence]. (Šīrāzī 2004, VII: 155–56)

Both the microcosm and the macrocosm are theophanies and one way to resolve the problem of evil is to consider this aspect of the created order. For Mullā Ṣadrā, it does not matter whether one considers the entirety of the cosmos as identical to the first thing emanated, the first intellect, or whether one looks at the detailed hierarchy and gradation within the order of the cosmos. Ultimately those ‘rooted in knowledge’ understand that the phenomenal multiplicity and the different stages of space and time do not violate the ultimate unity of what is created. It is the divine governance of the rational order of the cosmos that the lower and the imperfect seeks the higher and the more perfect, and that later plays a critical role in the perfecting of the former. So, for example, form perfects matter, and the intellect perfects the soul. Thus,

[T]he manner of the True One with the intellect and the soul and the nature and all things in their constitution and bringing into existence and guidance and direction and providence and facilitating grace and mercy and munificence and grace is above all that. (Šīrāzī 2004, VII: 158)

It is because God is above the totality of the rational order that the goodness and perfection of that order reflects that of the divine. Thus far, Mullā Ṣadrā’s theodicy seems akin to other Neoplatonic attempts to explain how evil can intervene in divine providence. But what makes his position more interesting is not only the further solution which re-introduces the role of *eros* into the cosmos but also his monism that arises from a deeper contemplation of divine simplicity.

In *Theophanies (al-Maẓāhir al-ilāhīya)*, Mullā Ṣadrā contemplates the Avicennian notion of providence as an intelligible approach to the creation and knowledge of the entirety of the cosmos, because the ‘simple intellect’ (*al-aql al-basīṭ*) that is the divine intellect encompasses all things and through its emanation of forms, it creates discrete knowledge that pertains to the essences of things that have issued from that simple intellect in their nature, in a manner that they—those things—are ‘from it’ and not ‘in it’ (Šīrāzī 1999, 46). This draws upon the presentation of the simple intellect in the *Theologia Aristotelis* and the notion of the perfection of the intellect (and indeed of it being above perfection—*fawq al-tamām*) (ps-Aristotle 1947, 110, 139–40, 156). In this context—as he often does—Mullā Ṣadrā

quotes a Qur'anic verse to justify: 'and with him are the keys to the unseen (*maḥfūẓ al-ghayb*) none knows them but he' (Q. al-An'ām 6.59) (Šīrāzī 1999, 47). The mediation is provided by the 'calamus' (*al-qalam*)—equivalent to the Neoplatonic *nous*—which like the divine is a simple intellect and a pure simple reality (*wāḥid ḥaqīqī basīṭ*). It is this that fashions the realities of things on the 'tablets of the souls and on the scrolls of hearts' (*fī alwāḥ al-nufūs wa-ṣaḥā'if al-qulūb*). Although it is a lesser being than the true One, once again with reference to the revelation: 'there is nothing but that we possess its treasures' (Q. al-Ḥijr 15.21). Mullā Ṣadrā explains the synonyms of this first emanation: 'the first intellect, the great soul, and angel brought near and the most noble contingent ... the Mother of the Scripture'—and as we have already seen, the perfect human, the microcosm. He relates this to the dual nature of providence that is explained in terms of the two aspects of who God decrees what exists in the created order through the theological notions of the 'measuring out' and the decree.

There are ... two levels to the functioning of the divine providence and its apportioning of the lot of contingents. The first is the intellectual measuring (*al-qadar al-ʿilmī*) out of the lot, which determines the forms of existents in specific spaces and times. The second is the extra-mental measuring (*al-qadar al-ḥāriṣī*) that pertains to the actual places and times of contingents. The higher intelligible realm of the *calamus* and the first *nous* is the locus of the divine decree (*al-qadāʾ*) but the lower level of the world of generation and corruption is where the measuring out takes place. (Šīrāzī 1999, 49)

In the *Wisdom of the Throne* (*al-Ḥikma al-ʿarshīya*), Mullā Ṣadrā puts forward a view that conflates the notion of divine providence with mercy that encompasses all things in his attempt to explain the existence of punishment in the hellfire—and we know that the ontological mandate of mercy is something dear to his version of apocatastasis. Just as the cosmos cannot exist without 'crude and rough souls, and extremely hard and cruel hearts', similarly because of the diversity and hierarchy of human souls, there is punishment in the hellfire that abides consistent with divine wisdom and providence (Šīrāzī 1981, 235–40). So it turns out that Mullā Ṣadrā collapses his understanding of divine knowledge and will, through the recourse to divine simplicity, into his presentation of providence.

For Mullā Ṣadrā, the created order is a monistic theophany.

Every simple reality is all existential things except what pertain to all deficiencies and non-existences [in themselves]. The necessary Being—exalted is he—is a simple reality, simple in every sense and he is all existence just as the totality of him is existence. (Šīrāzī 2004, VII: 100)

The final section of the discussion of providence relates to the nature of love that God has made innate to all existents so that they desire and return to their principle. This section owes much to Ibn ‘Arabī and earlier Sufi thinkers as well as the notions of Neoplatonic sympathy and motion inherited through Avicenna. Everything in the world of generation and corruption, every deficiency and imperfection has inbuilt the desire and love for what perfects and completes it. All beings are aware of this. As Mullā Ṣadrā puts it:

It is necessary in divine wisdom and lordly providence and in the beauty of governance and the generosity of the providential order that in every existent there is love so that through that love it may acquire the perfection appropriate to it and a desire to acquire what it lacks. This is the cause for the whole of the order and the beauty of the hierarchy in the governance of every single individual. This love exists in every one of the things that exist necessarily such that it is concomitant to it and cannot be separated from it. If it were possible to separate it from it from one, then it would have need for another love which would preserve the first love. ... So, love flows in all existents and in their parts. (Šīrāzī 2004, VII: 210–11)

Every beloved is the face of the divine and all love and desire for the beloved reverts back to God (Šīrāzī 2004, VII: 214–24). Love—erotic motion—accounts not only for the descent of being from God but also for its ascent and reversion. It also demonstrates the principle of accord and connection against discord and strife, overcoming plurality in search of unity. It resolves multiplicity as well as the problem of relative and parasitic evils. Mystics and Sufis have a major role in understanding this and indeed in teaching such a theodicy. It is therefore not surprising that Mullā Ṣadrā culminates his discussion with the grades of love and desire for God that the mystic has.

Human love is of three kinds: the greatest, the middling and the lesser. The greatest is the desire for meeting God and yearning to grasp God’s essence, God’s attributes and God’s acts. This yearning only occurs in mystics and

the comparison of the loves, desires, and yearning of people to mystics is like the comparison of children's love and desire for games to adults in their pleasures and motivation. (Šīrāzī 2004, VII: 252)

All humans have love innate in their disposition as well as desire and the wish even to be dominant. The task is then to realize one's humanity to perfect one's rational soul so that one can achieve the highest sense of love. The mystic who has realized this then considers his paradise to be in the here and now—as well as in the afterlife—because his love has internalized the divine presence and therefore at times, he appears like the wise fool laughing at the commonality for their follies, their sins, their fear of punishment and of the hellfire and especially the folly of chasing after the material but fleeting pleasures of the world—false beloveds (Šīrāzī 2004, VII: 254–55). The task of the person who has realized her humanity in this life is to become like the lover who is purely focused on the beloved and does not become distracted by this world and its ephemeral attachments and carnal desires (Šīrāzī 2004, VII: 256–57). The lover understands that true pleasures are disembodied. It is not worthy of a creature of intellect and love to be like the beasts of the earth and desire the life of this world that will perish:

The person of knowledge knows that the ways of the afterlife are more luminous, more ecstatic and more intense than the pleasures of this world since those things are real and everlasting while these this-worldly things are vain and perishing. The Prince of the Believers (ʿAlī), peace be with him, said: The hoarders of wealth die but the knowers are alive, everlasting over the duration of time, even while their persons are missed, their effect remain found in the hearts. (Šīrāzī 2004, VII: 258)

This quotation and the reference to ʿAlī brings us to the role of the mediation of the Prophet and the Shiʿi Imams as expression of divine love for humanity and the cosmos and the way in which our human attempts to love are channeled through love for them.

10.4 CONCLUDING REMARK

What can we draw from these historical accounts and from the archive of diverse Islamic thought? The neat coherence of these philosophical accounts do not necessarily speak well to most of us today. Perhaps, and

this has been exacerbated by the current COVID-19 situation, the notion of a powerful loving God with care for the cosmos even in the face of the existence of moral and natural (and even horrendous) evils is a comfort more so if it attunes us to ethical imperative about care for self and for the other, for those around us and our communities. This is precisely where the notion of *iḥsān* comes back and remains a powerful idea that our agency remains in the sight and presence of the divine and the good in it is guided by that principle. The aspiration to do the best, to be the best, and to do what is beautiful becomes a moral inspiration that guides the life of a Muslim, that in a sense defines what is the best in the *dīn*, as a direct unfolding of divine providence in a motion back to God, ever-proceeding from Him and every-reverting to Him.

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