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## Murtaza Mutahhari's Solution to the Problem of Evil<sup>+</sup>

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The Iranian religious scholar Murtaza Mutahhari (d. 1979) is best known as a close associate of Ayatollah Khomeini and a key intellectual force behind the 1979 Iranian revolution. Mutahhari wrote widely on legal and social issues, but his most substantial works are philosophical and theological. Among these writings is Mutahhari's *Divine Justice*,<sup>1</sup> which is an English translation of the 1973 second edition of his Persian book *'Adl-i Ilahi*.<sup>2</sup> The heading at the top of page 90 in *Divine Justice* declares, "Problem Solved." The problem that Mutahhari deems solved is the philosophical problem of evil: if God is good, just, and all-powerful, then why is there evil? This article will explore the import of Mutahhari's confident claim to have solved the problem of evil. The first part of the article will trace the contours of Mutahhari's solution, and the second part will contextualize Mutahhari's argument within his socio-political and intellectual context. This will show how Mutahhari brings an esoteric medieval Islamic philosophical tradition to bear in a modern milieu for the sake of Islamic revival.

<sup>+</sup> This is a slightly revised version of a paper presented at the "International Conference on the Philosophical Thought of Murtada Mutahhari" in Qom, Iran, May 28-29, 2014. A Persian translation of the paper is being published in the conference proceedings volume.

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1 Murtada Mutahhari, *Divine Justice* (Qum, Iran: International Center for Islamic Studies, 2004); references to this book will be given in the text.

2 Murtaza Mutahhari, *'Adl-i ilahi* (Tehran: Shirkat-i Sihamm-i Intishar, 1973). The first edition appeared three years earlier: Murtaza Mutahhari, *'Adl-i ilahi* (Tehran: Intisharat-i Mu'assasah-i Islami-i Husayniyyah-i Irshad ba hamkari-yi Shirkat-i Sihami-i Intishar, 1970). The book has also been translated into Arabic; see Murtada al-Mutahhari, *Al-'Adl al-ilahi* (Beirut: Al-Dar al-Islamiyya, 1997).

### The Solution

Mutahhari's solution to the problem of evil in *Divine Justice* follows Neoplatonic lines as developed by the eleventh-century Muslim philosopher Ibn Sina, also known as Avicenna (d. 428/1037), and the seventeenth-century Shi'i sage Mulla Sadra (d. 1050/1640). As Mutahhari explains, the philosophers begin with the cause and proceed to the effect. They proceed from God to the world, not the other way around. It is not fundamentally a matter of looking first to the world and weighing up the good and the evil in it in order to make a judgment about God's goodness and justice — Mutahhari says that this approach leads to inadequate understanding. It is rather beginning with the conviction that God is good, perfect and beautiful and then explaining how God's production of the world is the best possible and how evil is effectively non-existent. To quote Mutahhari: "[The philosophers] argue that the world is an effect of God. It is effectively a 'shadow' of God who is all-beauty. The shadow of the beautiful must naturally also be beautiful. They also argue that evil, in its essence, is non-existing and is accidental" (p. 93, cf. pp. 48-49, 94-95).

Mutahhari fields a common protest against this theodicy of optimism. Whatever the philosophers might say about the world being perfect, there is still a substantial amount of difference, discrimination, and evil in the world. Some things are ugly and others beautiful. Some things are perfect and others defective. There are angels, humans, animals, and inanimate objects. Why have not all things been created alike? Why must some suffer while others prosper (pp. 94-99)?

According to Mutahhari, this protest derives from an inadequate understanding of the necessary causal character of the universe. The world is not just a collection of events and created objects that God happens to arrange in a particular order with no inherent relations between them. That would be the occasionalism and voluntarism of the Ash'ari Kalam theologians found especially in Sunni Islam. Rather, there are essential causal relations between events and objects, which means that they cannot be separated out and abstracted from their requisite conditions and relations. Mutahhari gives the example of

the number five. The number five has no meaning unless it is set in relation to the other numbers and located between four and six. The number five could not be set in the place of the number seven arbitrarily. That would not signify anything. Likewise, it makes no sense to abstract particular human beings from their times and places and imagine them living at other times and places. God's will to create human beings is inseparable from the contexts, the conditions, and the relations that make their lives possible. Mutahhari explains as well that all things are ultimately traceable vertically up the causal chain to God's single will to create. Here, Mutahhari invokes the Qur'an, "Our command is but a single [word]" (Q. 54:50), and he adopts the Avicennan principle "From the One emanates only one" (*al-wāḥid lā yaṣḍuru minhu illā al-wāḥid*) (p. 103), that is, from God emanates only one single thing. Mutahhari does not fully explain why this principle "from one only one" is important in *Divine Justice*, but its intention is to preserve God's absolute unity. If two or more things were to emanate directly from God, this would entail composition in God's essence. Multiplicity then arises not from God directly but from that first singular emanation and the causal chain that extends downward from it to constitute the entirety of the world in a necessary causal order. Put differently, God wills the entire world order with a single will or act that is the first link in the world's hierarchical causal chain (pp. 99-104, 106-13).

In this light, Mutahhari observes, the difference that we find in the world is not something imposed by an agent. It is rather the function of the capacities of things themselves. Mutahhari makes this point with the following example. Imagine that we fill two ten liter containers with water, one full and the other half full. In this case, one container holds ten liters while the other container holds five liters because we have discriminated between the two containers. Then, imagine that we fill a ten liter container with water to overflowing and a five liter container to overflowing. Now, the difference in volumes of water in the two containers derives from the capacities of the containers themselves and not from an act of discrimination. This leads Mutahhari to articulate what he calls "the secret of differences": "The differences between beings are innate

and essential and a necessity of the system of causes and effects" (p. 104-6, quote p. 106, cf. p. 60). Everything has its proper and known place, as it says in the Qur'an, "There is none among us but has a known place" (Q. 37:164) (p. 112). There thus can be no complaint against God for creating some things perfect and others defective, for everything is given existence according to its capacity. Mutahhari writes, "Divine mercy fills every container to the extent of its capacity" (pp. 151-54, quote p. 153).

This vision of the world as a necessary causal chain in which things are actualized only according to their capacities might suggest a fatalistic moral outlook. However, Mutahhari nips this thought in the bud with an additional law that he says God has written into creation: God only helps those who help themselves. In the words of the Qur'an, "Indeed God does not change a people's lot, unless they change what is in their souls" (Q. 13:11) (p. 117). Mutahhari further asserts that human acts cannot occur without human will and choice: "Freedom to choose is an inseparable part of the human essence" (p. 124). Mutahhari spends little time in the book *Divine Justice* reconciling this assertion of human free choice with a world of causal necessity, and he refers readers to his book *Man and His Destiny* for further discussion. However, it is important to clarify that the kind of human freedom that Mutahhari is invoking here is probably not libertarian. This is not a matter of humans making choices independently of external causal constraints. It is rather a compatibilist freedom in which human choice is held together with the determinism of the causal chain created by God. Put differently, God creates human choices through necessitating causes.

Having explained the source of difference in the world, Mutahhari turns more directly in his book *Divine Justice* to the character of evil. He first rejects a metaphysical dualism of good and evil by claiming that pure evil does not exist. It has no creator, and thus God cannot be blamed for it. From one perspective things in the world are indeed deemed good or evil, but from another perspective, "there is no evil in the order of creation; what exists is good, and the existing order is the best order. Nothing more beautiful than

what exists is possible” (p. 129). Evil is then the lack of what should be. Evils are the imperfections and deficiencies that plague the world. Blindness, for example, is the absence of sight, and it is nothing in its own right. Similarly, ignorance is the lack of knowledge, and it likewise has no existence of its own. Mutahhari continues with the assertion that evils that happen to have real existence are in fact only relative. Something evil to one thing is not necessarily evil to another. A wolf may be evil for a sheep, but not in itself, and snake poison might be bad for humans but not for the snake itself or other animals. On Mutahhari’s reading, the world is not possible without relative evils, and the evils that are pure deficiencies and imperfections do not exist, even though God’s justice calls for removing deficiencies such as blindness, ignorance and illness (pp. 127-41).

Mutahhari also elaborates various ways in which evils are actually good. Metaphysically, the world is a system, and any alteration of its fundamental structure would be a change for the worse. Mutahhari writes, “Valleys and mountains, level and unlevel places, darknesses and lights, pains and pleasures, successes and failures, are all necessary” to maintain the world’s balance (p. 146). Similarly, ugliness is needed to manifest beauty (pp. 147-48), and afflictions and calamities are needed for the development of happiness and refinement of character (pp. 154-66). Opposites and conflict are essential to the order of creation and the manifestation of God’s blessing and grace, and Mutahhari accentuates this point by quoting Mulla Sadra, “If not for the conflict, the eternal grace of the Benevolent Origin [God] would not exist” (pp. 171-78, quote p. 173).

### Contextualizing the Solution

With Mutahhari’s solution to the problem of evil now fully in view, we can turn to some observations on the character and context of his work. The book *Divine Justice* is part of Mutahhari’s project to articulate Islam afresh in his own socio-political and cultural milieu. He writes in the introduction to the 1973 second edition, “My sole purpose [for more than twenty years] has been

to respond to and resolve the questions and problems that have been posed regarding Islamic issues in our time” (p. 2). He explains that *Divine Justice* began as a series of speeches for the Husayniyya Irshad Institute and that it treats “issues that were taken up with me many times over—often with the youth” (p. 4). Mutahhari helped found the Irshad Intitute in 1965 to nurture Islamic revivalism among intellectuals and educated young people in Iran.<sup>3</sup> As a product of this context, *Divine Justice* and Mutahhari’s other writings of the time fit neither into the traditional scholarship of Qom nor the secular scholarship of the modern university. They constitute a bridge between the two, or rather an apologetic for Islam among the modern intelligentsia and professional classes.<sup>4</sup> This apologetic character of Mutahhari’s *Divine Justice* manifests itself most directly in the fluidity of his writing and the seriousness with which he engages his readers. The apologetic character of the book comes across in other ways as well.

For example, at one point in the book, Mutahhari wonders whether he should have taken up modern science or literature rather than his traditional Islamic seminary studies. He acknowledges that modern education might have weakened his spiritual and intellectual state, but he reckons that he could well have nurtured sufficient piety with some religious reading alongside a modern curriculum. What brings Mutahhari to peace with his classical Islamic education is the fact that he would never have otherwise learned the profundities of Islamic philosophy and especially the principle that from the One only one can come. A modern education would never have opened to him the door of this Islamic philosophical paradigm (pp. 102-4).

It then becomes Mutahhari’s mission in *Divine Justice* to popularize the riches of that paradigm for a modern educated readership, to commend the

3 Mahmood T. Davari, *The Political Thought of Ayatullah Murtaza Mutahhari: An Iranian Theoretician of the Islamic State* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2005), 41-49. Mutahhari resigned from the Irshad Institute in 1971 over differences of views with its other leaders.

4 Hamid Dabashi, *Theology of Discontent: The Ideological Foundations of the Islamic Revolution in Iran* (New York: New York University Press, 1993), 150, notes that appeal of Mutahhari’s writings to “religiously sensitive urban professionals” (cf. pp. 213-14).

jewels of what was fundamentally an esoteric tradition reserved for an elite to a new kind of mass audience. In earlier centuries, Mutahhari may well have been accused of revealing the secret of destiny to the uncouth multitudes whose religiosity could only suffer from exposure to the necessary causal mysteries of the universe. But Mutahhari faced a new kind of multitude, a young, earnest, and secularly educated intelligentsia that needed serious answers to difficult religious questions if it were to stay religious at all. Mutahhari stood in to supply the need, and he does so in the conviction that the philosophical optimism that he espouses is nothing more than a formalized account of the trusting piety of the ordinary believer (pp. 91-93).

It was perhaps inevitable, however, that Mutahhari should oversimplify the historical record to augment the persuasive power of his apologetic. We see this clearly in the introduction to the 1973 edition of *Divine Justice* where Mutahhari builds an argument for his philosophically derived theodicy of optimism as uniquely Shi'i over against the main Sunni schools of Kalam theology, the Ash'aris and the Mu'tazilis. According to Mutahhari, the Mu'tazilis emphasized reason, divine justice, divine wisdom, and human freedom even to the extreme of positing human beings as creators alongside God. To the Ash'aris, this violated God's sole prerogative to create, and it limited God's power. The Ash'aris reacted by going to the opposite extreme, denying that good and evil could be known by reason and emphasizing God's power and total freedom to create whatever He so willed without purpose or reason. God could in no way be constrained by rational notions of good and evil. To the Mu'tazilis in turn, this Ash'ari God was unjust and capricious. Mutahhari observes that the Mu'tazilis and the Ash'aris each had their strengths and their weaknesses, but that the real import of the debate was to stir minds to think and pave the way for the solution of the Islamic philosophers. Additionally, Shi'i theology, according to Mutahhari, sided largely with the Mu'tazilis but reconceived the basic notions of justice, reason and free will in unique ways that are in fact those of the Islamic philosophical tradition deriving from Ibn Sina (pp. 6-22). Mutahhari's brief history of Islamic theology gives

little credit to the fact that parts of the Sunni world adopted an Avicennized vision of reality much like his own<sup>5</sup> or to the fact that Shi'ism also contains a stream of theology much closer to Mu'tazilism than he grants, in figures such as Shaykh al-Mufid (d. 413/1022) and 'Allama al-Hilli (d. 726/1325). However, Mutahhari's account does tell a rhetorically powerful story that has philosophized Shi'ism providing the solution to one of the most profound aporias of Islamic theology and monotheistic theologies more generally.

Mutahhari also brings the Shi'i philosophical solution to the problem of evil into dialogue with specifically Iranian and modern concerns. His Avicennan and Sadrian approach allows him to take a strong position against the Zoroastrian dualism of pre-Islamic Iran. He states, "Islam alone was able to purge this thousand year old heresy from the Iranian mind" (pp. 63-77, quote p. 66). The Mu'tazilis provided a less powerful defense against Zoroastrianism because they were accused of dualism themselves.

Mutahhari's primary modern opponents were Marxism and secularism. These were not merely ideological challenges posed from the outside by the west. They were found widely among Iranians themselves, and they undermined traditional religious sensibilities. In *Divine Justice*, Mutahhari zeroes in on modern materialism and the pessimism that he believes it engenders. On his analysis, materialistic pessimism leads to lack of faith, loss of meaning, and ultimately to suicide (pp. 77-85). As an example, Mutahhari cites the Iranian modernist fiction writer Sadiq Hidayat, who committed suicide in 1951. Hidayat came from the upper echelons of society, and, on Mutahhari's analysis, he had no want of money; the pleasures that he knew were of the dirtiest sort; he had no faith and nothing to work for and live for; and he could not appreciate the good gifts of God. Mutahhari forthrightly states that Hidayat should have been made to "taste hunger and nakedness" so that he would have come to understand the significance of bread and the essentials

5 Mutahhari does mention the optimistic dictum of al-Ghazali (d. 505/1111), "There isn't in the realm of possibility anything more marvelous than what exists," in the body of the book (p. 67).



of life. He adds that the world is better off without those people who commit suicide because they do not have the ability to face difficulties and appreciate the world's beauty. Ultimately, adversities and trials are blessings for which we should be thankful (pp. 169-71, cf. p. 82). For Mutahhari, a theodicy of philosophical optimism provides meaning in the deepest adversity and a quiet serenity that God's world is fundamentally good and beautiful. He writes, "The fact that believers and people of faith have calm demeanors and peace of mind is due to their perception of the world as an ordered and purposeful whole based on wisdom and knowledge. They do not see it as being senseless, chaotic, and without purpose" (p. 78).

### Conclusion

To conclude, one of the most striking things in a modern context is Mutahhari's combination of a best-of-all-possible-worlds philosophical optimism with social and political activism. While Mutahhari's *Divine Justice* is at times polemical, it is not excessively ideological. Mutahhari confines himself largely to traditional theological questions, and he does very little to relate God's justice to various kinds of political justice as we might find in Christian liberation theologies. To the ears of many a modern activist, it might sound like Mutahhari's highly rationalizing account of evil would fit nicely with political quietism. With evil completely explained and no possibility of a world better than this, why bother trying to change it? However, Mutahhari confounds an easy association of philosophical optimism with political quietism through powerful rhetoric and his steady conviction that optimism provides the spiritual resources necessary to live an active and meaningful life. If one of God's purposes in evil is to deepen our characters and spur us on to improve our own lot, then what is best about God's world is that it put us human beings in a very difficult situation—between a rock and a hard place—from which we must try to extricate ourselves. So, to Mutahhari's mind, no doubt, the Shi'i philosophical vision of reality provided the school of hard knocks required to support the activism and spirit of Islamic revival.