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Is displacing evil explaining it? Agency, ontological dependence, and divine permission in religious responses to the problem of evil

Deslocar o mal equivale a explicá-lo? Agência, dependência ontológica e permissão divina nas respostas religiosas ao problema do mal

¿Desplazar el mal equivale a explicarlo? Agencia, dependencia ontológica y permiso divino en las respuestas religiosas al problema del mal

Pablo Dietrich
Fundação Universidade Regional de Blumenau – FURB. Bachelor of Laws and postgraduate student in Religious Studies, Philosophy and Sociology at Faculdade Líbano. Student of Theology and Philosophy at Faculdade Estácio de Sá.
http://lattes.cnpq.br/2467496149913328 — https://orcid.org/0009-0003-5447-0550 — pablodietrichh@hotmail.com

Abstract:
This article offers a comparative examination of the strategies by which religious traditions displace the agency of evil from a supreme principle onto subordinate agents, created freedom, a dualistic structure, privation, greater goods, divine permission, or an eschatological resolution. It proposes an analytic grid made up of three levels of attribution — moral authorship, proximate causation, and permissive structure — and a condition of ontological ground, and argues that an answer given at one level does not, without further argument, constitute an answer to a question belonging to another. The strategies are reconstructed in their strongest form before being examined: Iranian dualism, the documented redistribution of the initiative of harm in ancient and Second Temple Judaism, the Christian sequence from privation to permission, and the Muʿtazilite/Ashʿarite pair together with the doctrine of acquisition. The result is limited and calibrated: each strategy clarifies a real dimension of the problem, none is a mere subterfuge, and none of them, taken alone, dissolves the justificatory question that bears upon the permissive structure — namely, why a perfectly good ground creates defectible agents, confers causal powers upon them, conserves them, maintains the laws that render harm effective, and does not intervene. The conclusion is not that theodicies have failed, but that the title question receives a variable answer depending on which dimension of evil is under examination.

Keywords:
problem of evil; divine permission; ontological dependence; agency; comparative theodicy.

Resumo:
Este artigo examina, em chave comparativa, as estratégias pelas quais tradições religiosas deslocam a agência do mal de um princípio supremo para agentes subordinados, para a liberdade criada, para uma estrutura dualista, para a privação, para bens superiores, para a permissão divina ou para uma resolução escatológica. Propõe-se uma grade analítica composta por três níveis de atribuição — autoria moral, causalidade próxima e estrutura permissiva — e uma condição de fundamento ontológico, e sustenta-se que uma resposta situada num nível não constitui, sem argumento adicional, resposta a uma pergunta pertencente a outro. As estratégias são reconstruídas na sua forma mais forte antes de examinadas: o dualismo iraniano, a redistribuição documental da iniciativa do dano no judaísmo antigo e do Segundo Templo, a sequência cristã da privação à permissão, e o par muʿtazila/ashʿarismo com a doutrina da aquisição. O resultado é limitado e calibrado: cada estratégia esclarece uma dimensão real do problema, nenhuma é mero subterfúgio, e nenhuma delas, isoladamente, dissolve a questão justificativa que recai sobre a estrutura permissiva —

a saber, por que um fundamento perfeitamente bom cria agentes defectíveis, lhes confere poderes causais, conserva-os, mantém as leis que tornam o dano eficaz e não intervém. A conclusão não é que as teodiceias fracassaram, mas que a pergunta do título recebe resposta variável conforme a dimensão do mal que esteja em exame.

Palavras-chave:
problema do mal; permissão divina; dependência ontológica; agência; teodiceia comparada.

Resumen:
Este artículo ofrece un examen comparativo de las estrategias mediante las cuales las tradiciones religiosas desplazan la agencia del mal desde un principio supremo hacia agentes subordinados, la libertad creada, una estructura dualista, la privación, bienes mayores, el permiso divino o una resolución escatológica. Propone una matriz analítica compuesta por tres niveles de atribución —autoría moral, causalidad próxima y estructura permisiva— y una condición de fundamento ontológico; asimismo, argumenta que una respuesta dada en un nivel no constituye, sin mayor argumentación, una respuesta a una pregunta perteneciente a otro nivel. Las estrategias se reconstruyen en su forma más sólida antes de ser examinadas: el dualismo iraní, la redistribución documentada de la iniciativa del daño en el judaísmo antiguo y del Segundo Templo, la secuencia cristiana que va de la privación al permiso, y la pareja muʿtazilí/ashʿarí junto con la doctrina de la adquisición. El resultado es limitado y calibrado: cada estrategia aclara una dimensión real del problema, ninguna es un mero subterfugio y ninguna de ellas, por sí sola, disuelve la cuestión justificativa que recae sobre la estructura permisiva —a saber, por qué un fundamento perfectamente bueno crea agentes falibles, les confiere poderes causales, los conserva, mantiene las leyes que hacen efectivo el daño y no interviene—. La conclusión no es que las teodiceas hayan fracasado, sino que la pregunta que da título al trabajo recibe una respuesta variable según la dimensión del mal que se esté examinando.

Palabras clave:
problema del mal; permiso divino; dependencia ontológica; agencia; teodicea comparada.

§ 1 — Introduction

When a religious tradition affirms that evil comes not from God but from an adversary, a rebel angel, a human choice, or a privation, it does something. The question of this article is what, exactly, it does — and, above all, what it does not do.

The standard formulation of the problem sets three divine predicates against the existence of evil and asks after their compatibility. The traditions have answered in many ways, and a good part of those answers has a recognisable form: the agency of harm is attributed to someone or something that is not the supreme principle. Satan willed it, Iblīs incited it, Ahriman corrupted it, man chose it, the creature fell. The question organising this article is whether that operation — call it displacement — constitutes an explanation of evil or merely the transfer of the explanatory burden to another level.

The answer to be defended is not simple, and it is worth stating at the outset so that the reader may measure the distance between what is intended and what is actually shown. The claim is that displacement is a real explanatory operation; that it does answer questions; and that the questions it answers are not the ones frequently taken to have been answered. Distinguishing those questions is the object of the article. It is not claimed that religions "evade" the problem — that is precisely the reading here refused — nor that the theodicies examined have failed, nor that there is any simple logical contradiction between God and evil.

The delimitation requires justification. Four axes are compared: Zoroastrianism, ancient and Second Temple Judaism, Christianity — in its patristic, scholastic, modern, and contemporary analytic formulations — and Islam. The selection is neither exhaustive nor representative in any statistical sense; it is analytic. Each axis occupies a different position with respect to one specific variable: the degree of ontological independence granted to the evil principle or agent. Zoroastrianism occupies the extreme at which that independence is maximal; Ashʿarism, the extreme at which it is minimal; the other two occupy intermediate and internally plural positions. What the comparison yields is not a typology — there are many, and better ones — but the possibility of testing whether variation in that variable alters what remains to be explained.

A second delimitation must be declared. The article treats moral evil and evil attributed to supernatural agency. Natural evil — earthquakes, disease, pre-human animal suffering — enters only where a tradition attributes it to an agent, as in Ahriman's hostile creation or Thomas's evil of natural defect; the grid proposed here was built for cases in which there is a proximate agent, and does not extend without adaptation to evils that have no author at all.

The aim is therefore comparative and analytic, and neither apologetic nor anti-religious. Nothing that follows depends upon granting or denying the existence of God. The article asks after the structure of the answers, not their truth.

The instrument of analysis is a grid made up of three levels of attribution — moral authorship, proximate causation, and permissive structure — and a condition of ontological ground, and the central thesis is that a sufficient answer at one of them does not, by itself, constitute a sufficient answer at the others: displacement typically operates upon the first two while leaving the last two untouched.

Two cautions delimit what the article can and cannot do.

The first is historiographical. The materials gathered here belong to distinct disciplinary fields — Iranian studies, Second Temple studies, patristics, scholasticism, *kalām*,

analytic philosophy of religion — and in each of them there are live controversies that a comparative article has no means of adjudicating. Where the literature is divided, this will be stated, and the division treated as datum rather than obstacle. In particular, the article does not claim that ancient authors consciously invented adversarial figures in order to correct a perceived theological contradiction. That is a claim about intentions, and the discipline recoils from it for good reasons. What can be documented is something else: that later texts causally reconfigure actions previously attributed directly to the deity. Between the documentable effect and the conjectured motive there is a distance this article does not cross.

The second caution is conceptual, and concerns vocabulary. To speak of the "ontological dependence of evil" suggests that evil is a substance — precisely what the Augustinian-Thomist tradition denies. To avoid that suggestion, the article speaks of the ontological dependence *of the conditions of possibility of evil*, or of the agents and structures in which evil becomes possible. The difference is not stylistic. A thesis about the nature of evil and a thesis about the status of the agents capable of producing it are distinct theses, and much of the confusion in this debate results from treating them as one.

A final observation on what the article does not claim. The distinction between causally explaining an evil and morally justifying its permission is not the invention of this text; it is named as such in the reference literature, and the requirement that the justifying good benefit the sufferer himself has explicit and well-known antecedents.[1] What is proposed here is the articulation of that distinction within a grid of levels and its use as a comparative instrument among traditions that the analytic literature rarely examines together. The contribution, if any, is one of systematisation and application — not of discovery.

§ 2 — The conceptual problem of displacement

[1] The distinction is named in Laura W. Ekstrom, "Theodicies", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2024: "there is a difference between a proposed causal explanation of evil and a divine justification for allowing evil". The benefit-to-the-sufferer requirement is in Eleonore Stump, "The Problem of Evil", *Faith and Philosophy*, v. 2, n. 4, 1985, and was systematised as "theodical individualism" by T. J. Mawson, "Theodical Individualism", *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, v. 3, 2011. The thesis that reasons of instrumental structure cannot, in principle, justify permitting horrendous evils is D. Z. Phillips's, in *The Problem of Evil and the Problem of God* (2004), and is discussed as such by Marilyn McCord Adams, "Ignorance, Instrumentality, Compensation, and the Problem of Evil", *Sophia*, v. 52, n. 1, 2013. I record the precedence so that what follows may be read as systematisation and not as novelty.

In this discussion the word “cause” does work it cannot bear. To say that Satan caused Job’s ruin, that man caused sin, or that Ahriman caused the corruption of the world may mean different and non-equivalent things. I propose to distinguish four levels.

Moral authorship. Who wills evil *as* evil? The question concerns intention and the orientation of the will. To answer it is to identify whose the malice is.

Proximate causation. Who directly performs the action that produces the harm? The question concerns execution. To answer it is to identify the immediate agent of the outcome.

Permissive structure. Who could prevent the harm and decides not to prevent it? The question concerns non-intervention by one who has the power to intervene. To answer it is to identify who permits.

Ontological ground. Upon what do the existence of the agents, their causal powers, and the order in which harm can occur depend? The question concerns sustenance. To answer it is to identify that without which neither the agents nor their powers would exist.

A precision about the form of the grid, before putting it to work. The first three are levels of attribution: they ask who wills, who executes, and who could prevent. The fourth is of another kind — not a further degree of agency, but a condition of ground, asking upon what the existence of the whole order depends. I keep the four together because the comparison needs them, but I record the difference at once, since it will matter again: ontological dependence does not produce imputation, and functions in this article as a condition of address for a question rather than as a premise of it.

The thesis is that an answer at one level does not automatically constitute an answer at the others. To say that Satan is the moral author of a given action answers the first level and does not yet answer why a perfectly good God creates, conserves, and permits an agent capable of producing that evil. Conversely — and this second half matters as much as the first — one should not conclude that ontological dependence entails moral guilt. That agents exist because of someone does not make them his instruments, nor does it transfer to him the malice of the will that moves them. The article works precisely upon that difference, and refuses both quick inferences alike.

The independence of the levels is logical, not historical. No tradition organises its thought by this grid, and none is expected to. The grid is an instrument of reading, and its utility is comparative: it allows one to check, for each strategy, which question received an answer and which remained open. An author who answers only at the first level is not mistaken; he is answering something else.

There follows the distinction between explanation and justification, which runs through the whole article. A functional explanation affirms that a given evil may produce a given good, or that it has a given function within a wider order. A moral justification affirms that it was morally permissible to permit that evil. The first does not entail the second. That someone's suffering produces a good does not establish that permitting it was permissible; it must further be the case that the good could not have been obtained otherwise, that it is proportionate to the harm, and — this is the point on which the contemporary literature most insists — that one can say to whom the good is owed and who bears the cost. I shall call these three tests, respectively, necessity, proportionality, and entitlement.

The entitlement test deserves particular attention, because it is what distinguishes an aggregated theodicy from a justification. An argument establishing that the world, on the whole, is better with certain evils than without them may be true and still leave entirely intact the victim's question, which is not "did the world improve?" but "why me?". Justification, unlike explanation, has an individual address. This is why the instrumentalisation of the victim is the structural risk of every greater-good theodicy, and not an accidental defect of some of them.

With those instruments in hand, I turn to the traditions. The order is one of decreasing ontological independence: I begin with the case in which the evil principle receives the most and end with the one in which it receives the least.

§ 3 — The dualist limit: Zoroastrianism

Zoroastrianism is the fundamental comparative case because it is there that displacement reaches its most radical form: the evil principle is not a creature, is not subordinate, and does not derive from the good principle. If there is a solution by independence, that is it. It should therefore be examined with the care that the specialist literature imposes, and not with the formulas of handbooks.

Three historiographical cautions are unavoidable, and none of them is secondary to the philosophical argument.

The first is chronological and documentary. The claim that Zoroastrianism was "the first dualist religion" cannot be sustained without heavy qualification. It is not known when — nor, for part of the scholarship, whether — Zarathustra lived; proposed datings range from

about 1750 BCE to about 588 BCE, and the Avesta contains no datable event.[2] Jean Kellens and Éric Pirart denied that the Gāthās are the work of an identifiable individual author, and Prods Oktor Skjærvø holds that nothing is gained by supposing Zarathustra's historicity, reading those texts as oral poetry in a sacrificial setting. If that line is right, the question "what did Zarathustra teach about evil?" loses its object, and with it the current scheme of an original ethical dualism later corrupted into a metaphysical one.

The second is philological, and is the gravest. The Gāthic corpus is, to a large extent, unintelligible. Gershevitch estimated that of the 238 surviving stanzas hardly fewer than 190 are partly or wholly incomprehensible, and the divergences among translators of the decisive passages — Yasna 30.3 first among them — are differences in kind, not in detail: it is debated whether the two *mainiiu* are primordial forces, impulses, mental states, or trances. Any philosophical thesis about "the ethical dualism of the Gāthās" therefore rests upon a text whose translation is the object of radical dissent. That must be declared, not circumvented.

The third is one of temporal distance. The Gāthās date, on the majority hypothesis, from around 1000 BCE; the *Bundahišn* and the *Dēnkard* were redacted in the ninth and tenth centuries CE — two millennia later. And the late Pahlavi sources, the *Škand Gumānīg Wizār* exemplarily, are apologetic works written under Islamic rule, defending dualism *against* monotheism: the dualism found there has already been hardened by interconfessional polemic.

With the cautions entered, what can be established remains.

In the Gāthās, Angra Mainyu is named only once, and there are two readings of what that means. On Hintze's, and on that of much recent scholarship, the Gāthic antagonist is the Bounteous Spirit, *Spəṇta Mainyu*, and not Ahura Mazdā directly; the shift to direct opposition between Ahriman and Ohrmazd in the *Bundahišn* would then be the relevant transformation, evil ceasing to oppose an aspect of the supreme principle and coming to oppose the supreme principle itself. Boyce contests that reading at its root, ascribing it to Martin Haug and to nineteenth-century Parsi apologetics, and holds that Angra Mainyu is from the outset the

[2] On the state of the question regarding dating, historicity, and the status of the corpus, see William W. Malandra's entries in the *Encyclopaedia Iranica* ("Zoroaster ii. General Survey" and "Gathas ii. Translations"). Gershevitch's estimate cited below appears in the latter. The distinction between what Iranian studies establish and what is commonly extracted from them in philosophy of religion supplies the substance of this section's caution. For a recent treatment of Zoroastrian dualism with the instruments of analytic philosophy, see Daniel Nolan, *Zoroastrianism and Contemporary Philosophy*, Cambridge Elements, 2025, whose chapter 2 distinguishes two responses of the tradition to suffering: limitation of divine power, and merit acquired in the struggle.

uncreated adversary of Ahura Mazdā. The argument of this section does not depend on which of the two is right, because the asymmetries examined below are attested in the Pahlavi sources on either reading.

As to the status of Angra Mainyu, there is a real scholarly disagreement not reducible to emphasis. Mary Boyce holds that he is uncreated and, in that precise sense, the "twin" of Ahura Mazdā; Almut Hintze defends a *sui generis* Zoroastrian monotheism in which Ahura Mazdā is the sole uncreated source and creation is *ex deo*; Gherardo Gnoli distinguishes Gāthic dualism, founded upon choice, from the later metaphysical dualism founded upon nature. To that disagreement is added another, of scope: Boyce and Shaul Shaked publicly diverged over whether Sasanian Zoroastrianism was orthodox and unified.

Zurvanism deserves mention, and a caution. The myth in which Zurvan, Time, begets Ohrmazd from his sacrifices and Ahriman from his doubt would resolve the asymmetry by giving the two a common origin — and would reintroduce the problem one storey higher, since the origin of evil would become a defect in the first principle. But de Jong observes that the myth is found in no Zoroastrian source: all attestations are Armenian, Syriac, Greek, or Arabic. Zaehner's reconstruction, which made Zurvanism a coherent heretical sect, has been criticised as circular, and Shaked showed it to be one among several variants of the cosmogony. Boyce, by contrast, retained Zurvanism as a genuine heresy, reconstructed on other lines. Nothing here rests upon it.

The explanatory advantage of dualism is real and must be granted in its strongest form. If the evil principle is independent, the origin of evil does not go back to the good principle, and the four levels distinguished above receive convergent answers: moral authorship is Ahriman's, proximate causation belongs to his hostile creation, the permissive structure ceases to be permissive because Ohrmazd cannot simply annihilate him, and the ontological ground of evil agents is not Ohrmazd. It is the only strategy examined in this article that attempts, with a single operation, to disjoin the good principle from all four points of the grid. And the price is structural and is recorded in the sources: metaphysical unity and ultimate sovereignty.

But Zoroastrian dualism is not symmetrical, and it is here that the examination becomes interesting.

The asymmetry is threefold. It is epistemic: Ahriman's intellect is deficient, he is unaware of Ohrmazd for three thousand years, and several theologians held that Ohrmazd created the material world as a trap and a snare for him, exploiting his stupidity. It is ontological: Ahriman has no material creation, and the Pahlavi formulas go so far as to say

that “the demons do not exist”. And it is temporal: Ahriman receives limited time; Ohrmazd, time without end.

Each of these asymmetries reintroduces, by its own route, precisely the question that dualism was supposed to have dissolved. If Ohrmazd is omniscient and his adversary is not; if the material world is the battlefield chosen by one who knows the outcome against one who does not; if the scenario was chosen by one who knows the outcome — then the system has not eliminated the permissive structure but merely reconfigured it. There is no permitting of an evil one could not prevent; there is, instead, the deliberate choice of a scenario in which the harm is borne by third parties. The question changes shape, but it is the same question: to whom is the good owed, and who pays the cost.

The internal tension that the sources themselves leave unresolved confirms this. Shaul Shaked put it with exemplary clarity: Ahriman is not a created being, and it seems doctrinally unacceptable to hold that he could be annihilated; yet to let Evil subsist after the dissolution of the world runs against the notion that eschatology eliminates evil.[3] The sources oscillate between annihilation by molten metal and perpetual impotence, and do not decide. This is no learned detail: it is the problem of evil in its Zoroastrian form. The majority doctrine finds it unacceptable that Ahriman, being uncreated, could be annihilated; and eschatological hope makes it difficult to let him subsist. Note that the second route — perpetual incapacitation — dissolves the dilemma, at the price of leaving Evil subsistent and powerless; it is therefore not a demonstrated contradiction but a tension the sources settle one way or the other. The independence that eases the problem of the origin aggravates the problem of the end.

There is, besides, a structural irony worth recording. The ninth-century apologist Mardānfarrox argues that monotheists cannot explain evil — either God created it, or evil is a mere privation of the good — and that dualism, by positing an independent evil principle, *preserves* divine omnipotence. Yet Boyce holds that the attribution of omnipotence to Zarathustra is an artefact of nineteenth-century scholarship and Parsi apologetics. Three layers, then, that contradict one another: an apologist who claims omnipotence as dualism’s achievement, a scholarship that reads it as an original datum, and an ancient corpus in which that category may not operate at all.

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[3] Shaul Shaked, “Eschatology i. In Zoroastrianism and Zoroastrian Influence”, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, vol. VIII, fasc. 6. The formulation of the dilemma is his; the reading here made of it — as being the Zoroastrian form of the problem of evil — is the present article’s. Almut Hintze, in the entry “Frašō.kərəti”, records the same divergence between annihilation and permanent incapacitation.

The greater the ontological independence granted to the evil principle, the easier it is to remove its origin from the good principle — and the greater the cost to a metaphysics of unity and absolute sovereignty. That is the provisional formulation the remainder of the article will test. Note, however, that it is not a law, and the Zoroastrian case shows why: independence, once granted, does not come alone; it comes accompanied by asymmetries without which the attested eschatology would be incoherent, and those asymmetries return the question of permission through the back door.

§ 4 — The redistribution of agency in ancient and Second Temple Judaism

The Jewish case is the most delicate in this article, and for a precise reason: it is the one in which the temptation to infer intentions from effects is strongest, and in which the specialist literature most explicitly recoils.

What can be documented is a causal reconfiguration. In 2 Samuel 24:1 it is YHWH's anger that incites David to number Israel; in 1 Chronicles 21:1 the one who stands against Israel and incites David is *satan* — and, unlike Job 1–2 and Zechariah 3, without the definite article. In Genesis 22 it is God who tests Abraham; in Jubilees 17–18 the initiative is Prince Mastema's, in a scene explicitly modelled upon the prologue of Job; and in Jubilees 10 the same Mastema asks for and obtains that part of the spirits remain under his command. There is here, undeniably, a documented redistribution of the initiative of harm, and a growing differentiation between God and adversarial agents.

What cannot be affirmed is that these texts were written *in order to* exonerate God.

The most serious objection to that reading comes not from outside biblical studies but from the leading recent specialist on the figure of the *satan*. Ryan Stokes expressly rejects explanations grounded in the redactor's theological agenda, and his argument is internal: the substitution does not significantly distance God from David's sin, since the *satan* remains YHWH's agent, the executor of a divine punishment.[4] If the aim were exoneration, the means

[4] Ryan E. Stokes, "The Devil Made David Do It… Or Did He? The Nature, Identity, and Literary Origins of the Satan in 1 Chronicles 21:1", *Journal of Biblical Literature*, v. 128, n. 1, 2009, p. 91–106. Stokes further observes that the grammatical argument from the definite article does not by itself settle the question. The contrary position — that the Chronicler introduced an intermediary precisely in order to resolve the problem of God commanding an act and then punishing it — is defended by Louis C. Jonker, "'Satan Made Me Do It!'", *Old Testament Essays*, v. 30, n. 2, 2017. I record the divergence because it is decisive: this article's thesis does not depend on which of the two is right, but would be weakened if the exonerative reading were presented as settled.

chosen is remarkably ineffective. Sara Japhet goes further and denies the presupposition: for her, the Chronicler continues to attribute the origin of evil to God, and there is in the text not the slightest implication of an independent existence of evil. And Stokes adds a philological thesis that shifts the concept itself: the noun would denote not generic opposition or accusation but violent physical attack — so that the figure in Job does not accuse but attacks, and the one in Zechariah 3 is not accusing Joshua but is about to execute him.

The methodological caution is equally general. Miryam Brand warns against presupposing theological consistency within and between ancient texts, and shows that the type of explanation of sin correlates with literary genre rather than necessarily with the author's convictions. Todd Hanneken denies that Jubilees is primarily exonerating God, reading Abraham's test as pedagogy of the proven righteous. Jacques van Ruiten explains Jubilees' departures in exegetical terms — gaps, inconsistencies, and problems perceived in the source text — and not in terms of apologetic intention. And Thomas Farrar shows that Enochic demonology and biblical satanology are distinct traditions that only later intertwine, concluding that there was no standard Jewish satanology in the period: there is therefore no single "Satan" that anyone could have invented.

The formulation the literature authorises is then this: several Second Temple texts narratively redistribute the initiative of harm onto subordinate figures, and that redistribution has a limited theodical effect — it distances immediate agency without eliminating either the authorisation or the dependence — without its being possible to establish that it had that motive. Between effect and motive there is a step this article does not take — and which it thematises, because it is exactly the step the current reading of the phenomenon tends to take without noticing.

But there is a datum in these texts that bears still more upon the argument, and that depends upon no conjecture about intentions.

In all of them, subordination is maintained — and it is explicit. In the prologue of Job the structure is unequivocal: the adversary proposes, YHWH authorises, the adversary executes, and the authorisation is expressly limited. In Jubilees 10, Mastema asks and receives. The initiative moves; the authorisation stays where it was. The texts do not conceal the permissive structure: they exhibit it, and make it the axis of the scene.

This has a philosophical consequence that must be stated without exaggeration. The documented redistribution operates upon the first two points of the grid: narrative initiative and proximate causation may pass to the subordinate agent. The transfer of moral authorship, however, depends upon the status each tradition assigns to that agent and must not be

presumed uniformly — the ha-satan of Job challenges the righteous man's integrity and carries out the authorised test, but to qualify him as one who wills evil *as* evil, on the definition section 2 gave for moral authorship, already presupposes a malice the narrative need not attribute to him, and would project the later Christian Satan onto the text. Not every causal displacement is therefore also a moral displacement — which is a consequence of the instrument itself. And neither touches the last two points. The adversarial agent has no independent existence, does not act without permission, and the order in which he acts remains the same. And since the text itself stages the authorisation, the displacement is in these cases *self-limiting*: it says, in the same gesture, who took the initiative and who consented. The immediate moral distance between God and the harm increases; the ultimate ontological dependence is not eliminated; and the permissive structure is not merely left unconcealed but put on stage.

It is worth adding the textual counterpoint that blocks any simple evolutionary narrative. Isaiah 45:7 affirms that YHWH forms light and creates darkness, makes peace and creates evil — and a Qumran manuscript there replaces *shalom* with *tov*, making the claim explicitly about good and evil. Fredrik Lindström devoted a monograph to arguing that the scholarly axiom about divine responsibility for evil in the Old Testament is untenable and is to be abandoned. Thomas Römer, by contrast, reads Second Isaiah as an attempt to integrate evil into monotheistic theology, and holds that the attempt failed, later texts resisting the direct attribution of evil to the deity.[5] Note the form of Römer's thesis: the failure of a theological programme, not the intention of individuals. It is the most defensible formulation, and the one this article adopts.

§ 5 — Christianity: from privation to permission

The Christian tradition produced the greatest number of distinct strategies and thematised permission most explicitly. It is also the one in which confusion among the levels

[5] The hypothesis of Iranian influence upon Jewish differentiation is defended, among others, by Philip Alexander for the demonology of Qumran, and contested by Morton Smith in the entry "Bible ii. Persian Elements in the Bible" of the *Encyclopaedia Iranica* — which speaks of "parallelism without clear contact" — and by James Barr at the methodological level. Jason Silverman has further recorded the ideological liabilities of older scholarship on the subject. The present article takes no side: its thesis concerns the structure of the answers, not their genealogy.

is most frequent, because the strategies circulate together and lean upon one another. I reconstruct each in its strongest form before asking what remains.

5.1 Augustine and privation

The Augustinian thesis is that evil is not a substance: it is the privation of a due good. It has a precise target — Manichaean dualism — and a precise task: if evil is not a thing, then it was not created, and the existence of evil does not oblige one to posit a creating principle of evil.

Once that task is discharged, its reach is considerable. It establishes that everything that is, insofar as it is, is good; that God did not create an evil substance; and that the question "who made evil?" is, in its most literal register, a malformed question. None of these claims is trivial, and it is imprecise to say, as is sometimes said, that "Augustine holds that evil does not exist". He holds that evil is not a *nature*, which is another matter and is compatible with the claim that evils occur.

Two objections must be recorded, and they are of unequal force.

The first is the ontological objection, today the most discussed: privation fails already as an *analysis* of evil, before reaching theodicy. Pain does not seem to be the absence of something; it is a phenomenological experience that is positively bad. And deliberate cruelty involves qualities the agent possesses, not qualities he lacks. There is a live analytic literature of attack and defence on this point, which the article does not adjudicate.[6]

Before the second objection, however, Augustine must be granted a thesis that is not that of privation and that bears precisely upon the fourth level: an evil will has no efficient cause but a deficient one, and to look for the efficient cause of an evil will would be like trying to see darkness. This establishes that the defection of the created will does not causally go back to the ground, without denying the ontological dependence of the agent that defects. It is more than privation establishes, and it is the piece Leibniz will inherit.

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[6] The ontological critique of privation is synthesised by Todd Calder in the entry "The Concept of Evil" of the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, and developed in "Is the Privation Theory of Evil Dead?", *American Philosophical Quarterly*, v. 44, n. 4, 2007. The contemporary defence is in W. Matthews Grant, "The Privation Account of Moral Evil: A Defense", *International Philosophical Quarterly*, v. 55, n. 3, 2015. A distinct and internal objection, directed at the "Augustinian type" rather than at privation as analysis, is John Hick's in *Evil and the God of Love*: if creatures exist in the presence of infinite plenitude, rebellion becomes inexplicable; if they do not, the circumstances are weighted against them from the start.

The second objection is the one that bears upon the grid. Even if the privation thesis is granted in full, it answers at the level of the ontological ground in a strict sense — evil is not a creature — and does not answer at the level of the permissive structure. That evil is privation does not explain why the order in which privations occur was instituted and is conserved by one who could have instituted it otherwise. Privation is a thesis about *what* evil is; permission is a question about *why* there is a world in which it can occur.

5.2 Aquinas: primary and secondary causation

If there is one author who does not displace, it is Thomas. His contribution is not to dilute permission but to name it.

The structure is familiar. God is first cause; creatures are second and genuine causes. Conservation is not an act distinct from continued creation, and divine concurrence accompanies every creaturely operation. On evil, the decisive distinction stands at *Summa theologiae* I, q. 19, a. 9: God does not will the evil of fault; he wills the evil of natural defect and the evil of penalty in willing the goods to which they are annexed, and — in the reply to the third objection — neither wills that evil be done nor wills that evil not be done, but *wills to permit evils to be done, and this is a good*.[7]

Three observations on that text.

First: it is an answer at the level of the permissive structure, not a displacement. Thomas does not say that permission eliminates the question; he says that permission is itself willed and that it is good. He therefore assumes the burden.

Second: the reply to the first objection of the same article anticipates the contemporary critique of the greater-good strategy. Thomas rejects the formula on which God would will evil because it serves a good end, and the reason is that evil is not ordered to the good *per se* but only *per accidens* — the tyrant does not intend that the martyrs' virtue should result from persecution. Whoever wants an instrumental theodicy will find less support in Thomas than he supposes.

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[7] *Summa theologiae* I, q. 19, a. 9, ad 3: "vult permittere mala fieri, et hoc est bonum". The relevant locations at I, q. 22 (providence), qq. 48–49 (the nature and cause of evil) and q. 103 (divine government) have also been checked, as has *Summa contra gentiles* III, chs. 70–73, especially ch. 71, on providence not wholly excluding evil and on the operation of second causes. On the taxonomy conservationism/concurrentism/occasionalism, see Alfred J. Freddoso, "God's General Concurrence with Secondary Causes: Why Conservation Is Not Enough", *Philosophical Perspectives*, v. 5, 1991.

Third, and most important for what follows: Brian Davies's Thomist reading holds that, in speaking of divine goodness, Thomas never mentions duties or obligations on God's part — divine goodness means being desirable, not possessing moral virtues. If that is right, the question "how can a morally good God permit the evils that occur?" rests upon metaphysical assumptions Thomas would not accept. It is the strongest reply to this article's thesis, and I return to it in section 10.

5.3 Leibniz

The *Theodicy* organises the inherited material with an economy worth reconstructing. Metaphysical evil is the limitation inherent in every creature; physical evil is suffering; moral evil is sin. God neither wills moral evil nor is its author: he permits it. The antecedent will inclines to each good taken in isolation; the consequent will is final and decisive, and chooses this world as the best possible integration of competing goods.

The fine mechanism is the double concurrence. Physical concurrence is God's active and immediate participation in every creaturely action, but extends only to the perfection or positivity of the action; as regards sin, there is concurrence with the positive dimension of the act and mere permission of sin as such, creatures being "deficient causes" through inherent metaphysical limitation. Note the structural dependence: Leibnizian permission works only if the privative ontology is true, since it is privation that identifies within the act that with which God does not concur. Privation, which in Augustine is an anti-Manichaean thesis, does theodical work in Leibniz that it did not do there.

Leibniz's advantage is that he converts functional explanation into justification, and he has an explicit means of doing so: the optimality premise. If this world is the best possible, then every evil it contains is the condition of a good unobtainable otherwise, and the tests of necessity and proportionality are satisfied by construction. The cost is that everything then depends upon that premise, which is attackable in its own right — Robert M. Adams called into question whether the very notion of a best possible world can function as a moral requirement. And the entitlement test remains untouched: global optimality does not say to whom the good of a particular evil is owed.

5.4 Hick and soul-making

The Irenaean theodicy shifts the axis from past to future. The world is not a damaged paradise; it is an environment of formation. Human goodness slowly built up through personal histories of moral effort has, in the Creator's eyes, a value that justifies even the long travail of the process, and the epistemic distance at which human beings exist — the real possibility of interpreting the world religiously or naturalistically — is a condition of genuine moral development, not a defect. Reconstructed in this way, the proposal answers a real question: it gives evil a teleological function, and not merely an origin.

The three tests apply with different results. Necessity asks whether that degree of suffering was necessary to produce that good, and the difficulty is familiar: there are sufferings that destroy personality rather than form it. Proportionality asks whether the good produced is proportionate to the harm. Entitlement asks who receives the good and who pays the cost — and it is here that the objection bites, because a child who dies under torture is formed by none of it.

Hick has an answer to this, and it is structural: universalist eschatology. Without the hope that God will eventually reach all, the argument does not go through, because the formative process must be completed in each person for the cost to have an addressee. That is a virtue of the system — it knows what it needs — and it is also its exposure: whoever will not grant universalism cannot grant the theodicy.

5.5 Plantinga: defence and theodicy

The Free Will Defense answers J. L. Mackie's argument, and it is not a theodicy. It does not aim to explain positively why God permits the evils that exist, nor any of them in particular. It aims to block the allegation of *logical* incompatibility between the existence of God and the existence of evil, and for that it suffices to exhibit a possible proposition which, conjoined with God's existence, entails the existence of evil. That is why transworld depravity need be neither true nor probable: it needs to be possible. To treat Plantinga as someone who explained all evil is to ascribe to him a project he explicitly refused.

That said, a correction to the handbook narrative is obligatory. The claim that the Free Will Defense solved the logical problem is disputed in the specialist literature, and by defenders of the distinction itself. Daniel Howard-Snyder calls that consensus "current mythology" and holds that Mackie's failure was not established by Plantinga, because it is reasonable to refrain from believing the defence's central claim. Richard Otte argues that,

given the canonical definition, it is necessarily false that every essence suffers from transworld depravity — which strikes at the defence's enabling premise — while proposing corrected definitions. Alexander Pruss offers a counterexample under standard Molinism. Graham Oppy holds that there is more to the deductive argument than is usually allowed.[8] The safe formulation is therefore this: it has been established that the strategy of defence is the right strategy for blocking logical incompatibility, and that Mackie did not demonstrate that incompatibility; whether the 1974 formulation succeeds is the object of live technical dispute.

One further move of the defence should be recorded, since it bears most directly upon this article: the extension to natural evil by the hypothesis that it may result from the free action of fallen non-human beings. It is the purest contemporary analytic instance of the operation studied here — displacement of the agency of harm onto a subordinate adversarial agent — and the grid yields a clean result upon it: it answers at the first and second levels, does not answer at the third or fourth, and Plantinga does not claim that it should. The case corroborates the central thesis rather than telling against it.

I turn now to the objection that bears upon the grid, acknowledging at once that it is not new.

Freedom of decision is not the same as unlimited causal efficacy of the decision. A person may freely will to kill; may freely pull the trigger. It does not logically follow that the weapon must function, that the bullet must strike the victim, and that the victim must die. Morally significant choice is exhausted in the act of choosing and in its internal conditions; the outcome in the world is a matter of a distinct causal order, the maintenance of which is itself an act. The resulting question is not why God created free beings, but why preserving significant freedom would require preserving so great a capacity to harm third parties — and, above all, why non-intervention in the *consequences* of wrong choices is a necessary part of the grant of freedom.

I record the precedence: the reference formulation of the free-will theodicy already separates these two items, requiring that it be a very great outweighing good both to create beings with morally significant freedom and *not to intervene to prevent the consequences of*

[8] Daniel Howard-Snyder, "The Logical Problem of Evil: Mackie and Plantinga", in McBrayer and Howard-Snyder (eds.), *The Blackwell Companion to the Problem of Evil*, 2013, p. 19–33; Daniel Howard-Snyder and John O'Leary-Hawthorne, "Transworld Sanctity and Plantinga's Free Will Defense", *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, v. 44, n. 1, 1998, p. 1–21; Richard Otte, "Transworld Depravity and Unobtainable Worlds", *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, v. 78, n. 1, 2009, p. 165–177; Alexander R. Pruss, "A Counterexample to Plantinga's Free Will Defense", *Faith and Philosophy*, v. 29, n. 4, 2012, p. 400–415; Graham Oppy, *Arguing about Gods*, 2006.

their wrong choices.[9] What is done here is merely to make explicit that the second item is a question of a different level from the first — it belongs to the permissive structure, not to moral authorship.

The defender's strongest reply is equally familiar and must be granted: a world in which decisions produce no effect is not a world of significant freedom but of simulation; and a world in which divine intervention selectively suspends consequences is a massively irregular world in which prudential agency becomes impossible. The objection is therefore not victorious; it shifts the burden, and I return to it in section 10.

5.6 Sceptical theism

The sceptical response must be reconstructed in its strongest form, because in the weak form it is an evasion and in the strong form it is a serious epistemological argument.

The strong form is this: human inability to see a divine reason does not entail the absence of a reason. Formally — and this is the condition Stephen Wykstra formulated under the name CORNEA — the inference from "I see no good that would justify" to "there is no good that would justify" is legitimate only if it is reasonable to expect that, were there such a good, we would see it; and that expectation is precisely what is at issue when the intellect in question is incommensurably greater than ours. The inference under attack is that of William Rowe's evidential argument. The sceptical theses usually mobilised, in Michael Bergmann's formulation, affirm that we have no good reason to think that the possible goods we know of are representative of the possible goods there are, the same as regards evils, and the same as regards the entailment relations between goods and the permission of evils.

It is a good argument, and it is not self-refuting. To say that it refutes itself is caricature.

The tension lies elsewhere, and it is one of scope. The sceptical theses cannot be confined to the case of theodicy. On the global-generalisation objection, applied without restriction they also disable the inferences that sustain ordinary moral judgment about what we ought to prevent, confidence in revelation, and theistic design arguments. Michael

[9] Ekstrom, "Theodicies", cit.: to serve as a God-justifying reason for permitting those evils, it must be a very great outweighing good to create beings with morally significant free will *and not to intervene to prevent the consequences of their wrong choices*. The separation of the two items is therefore prior to this article. James P. Sterba, in *Is a Good God Logically Possible?* (2019), reopens the logical problem along a related route, formulating moral evil prevention requirements.

Almeida and Graham Oppy formulated this as a *reductio* on consequences; Stephen Maitzen drew out the perverse practical consequence that the more extreme an innocent's involuntary suffering, the more reason we would have to believe it is for the sufferer's own net good, and hence the less reason to prevent it; Erik Wielenberg pointed to the internal theological cost of being unable to exclude divine deception.[10]

In terms of the grid, the precise formulation is this: the more a defence depends upon our inability to assess God's reasons, the more it must explain how we can still predicate, in an epistemically robust way, that God is perfectly good. It is an epistemological tension, not an incoherence, and the sceptical theist has replies — which exist and are discussed.

5.7 Eschatology

The eschatological resolution affirms that evil will end: it is a thesis about destiny, and answers the question whether evil is final. The necessary distinction is between "evil will end" and "the existence and duration of evil were justified". The first does not entail the second. A good final destiny does not retroactively justify the course, unless one adds a premise that does the work — for example, that the final good is not merely greater than the evil suffered but *defeats* it within the life of the one who suffered it, integrating rather than compensating for it. That additional premise is precisely what distinguishes compensation from defeat, and it is the requirement Marilyn McCord Adams formulates against generic theodicies: the justifying good must be a good *for the individual victim*.[11]

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[10] Michael J. Almeida and Graham Oppy, "Sceptical Theism and Evidential Arguments from Evil", *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, v. 81, n. 4, 2003, p. 496–516; Stephen Maitzen, "Ordinary Morality Implies Atheism", *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, v. 2, 2009, p. 107–126; Erik Wielenberg, "Sceptical Theism and Divine Lies", *Religious Studies*, v. 46, 2010, p. 509–523; Ian Wilks, "The Global Skepticism Objection to Skeptical Theism", in McBrayer and Howard-Snyder (eds.), 2013. None of these authors alleges self-refutation, which is why the objection is formulated as undue generalisation of scope. It should be recorded that it bears upon certain formulations of sceptical theism — those that mobilise ST1 –ST3 without restriction — and that moderate versions expressly refuse the extension to ordinary moral inferences; what is maintained in the body is the global-generalisation objection, not a consequence every sceptical theist would have to accept. Replies in Michael C. Rea, "Skeptical Theism and the 'Too Much Skepticism' Objection", in the same volume.

[11] Marilyn McCord Adams, *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God*, 1999; and "Ignorance, Instrumentality, Compensation, and the Problem of Evil", *Sophia*, v. 52, n. 1, 2013. The distinction between balancing off and defeat goes back to Roderick M. Chisholm, "The Defeat of Good and Evil", *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association*, v. 42 (1968–1969), p. 21–38.

Where the premise is assumed — as in Hick, with universalism, or in the expanded theism Adams defends — eschatology does justificatory work. Where it is not, it answers destiny and not permission.

§ 6 — Islam: sovereignty, justice, and agency

Islam is summoned here for a structural reason, not for completeness: it is the tradition in which the tension between divine sovereignty and created responsibility was thematised most explicitly, and in which the permissive structure is least concealed. It is also the tradition about which the coarsest generalisations circulate, and these should be disarmed before the argument proceeds.

The claim that "Islam is deterministic" is untenable without qualification, because the principal positions are mutually incompatible and all of them are Islamic — and to the Muʿtazila and Ashʿarism must be added Māturīdism, the third Sunni school, which occupies an intermediate position on the human act. The debate is internal and ancient: already in the first century of the Hijra — Maʿbad al-Juhanī, d. 80/699 — the *Qadariyya* maintained human power over acts, and the controversy over the creation of acts organises *kalām* from its beginnings.

The Muʿtazila is founded upon divine justice, *ʿadl*, and holds that human beings produce their own acts — directly, as regards choice and bodily motion, and by generation, *tawallud*, as regards effects.[12] Evil is reformulated as unjustified suffering: God being just, all suffering imputable to divine action requires a justifying reason, and the available categories are compensation, *ʿiwaḍ*, admonition, punishment, benefit, *maṣlaḥa*, and assistance, *luṭf*. The standard of goodness is objective and applies equally to God and to creatures — and it is here that the rupture with Ashʿarism occurs. The doctrine of *al-aṣlaḥ*, on which God does what is most salutary, is primarily a demand for optimality addressed to each responsible individual;

[12] On the Muʿtazilite doctrine of the human act and on *tawallud*, see Kara Richardson, "Causation in Arabic and Islamic Thought", *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*; and Rahim Acar, "Arabic and Islamic Philosophy of Religion", *SEP*, §5, for the categories justifying suffering. The reference work covering the theory of the human act across all schools is Daniel Gimaret, *Théories de l'acte humain en théologie musulmane* (1980). The difference in the scope of *al-aṣlaḥ* is documented in Orhan Şenel Koloğlu, "Muʿtezile'nin Hüseyniyye Ekolünün Dünyevî Aslah Konusuna Yaklaşımı", *İslâm Araştırmaları Dergisi*, n. 39, 2018, p. 7–27: the Basran school restricted the obligation to religious matters, while the Baghdadi school extended it to mundane ones as well; the later Basran Ḥusayniyya adopted the Baghdadi extension.

its generalisation into cosmic optimality is a further step, and the extension of the doctrine beyond religious matters is disputed among the schools. That step is taken by another route, and must not be ascribed indiscriminately to the Muʿtazila.

Ashʿarism makes the inverse move and pays the symmetrical price. God creates the powers by which human beings execute their acts; the agent *acquires* the act — *kasb* — and is responsible for it; and the relation between the created power and its object is not causal. God alone has causal power. Within the occasionalist framework, God is the immediate cause of all change in the created world, and the connection between what is believed to be cause and what is believed to be effect is not necessary.

The doctrine of acquisition is where the tradition attempts to have both things at once: total causal sovereignty and genuine human responsibility. It is also where the difficulty is acknowledged. There is no need to repeat the polemical verdict that *kasb* is an empty formula — it suffices to record that the doctrine continues to this day to be re-examined and reinterpreted, which is symptom enough.[13] To treat it caricaturally would in any case be a mistake: it is a deliberate intermediate position, not an expedient.

Al-Ghazālī draws the optimistic consequence in a celebrated formula — *laysa fī l-imkān abdaʿ mimmā kān*, there is nothing within the possible more wondrous than what is — and the argument takes the form of a dilemma: if a better world were possible, either God could create it and did not, which would make him miserly, or he could not, which would make him impotent. The convergence with Leibniz is evident and has been studied. Ibn Taymiyya, for his part, makes a locating move that bears directly upon this article's grid: human beings are the agents of their acts, and hence liable to reward and punishment, *because God creates their acts in them and not in himself*. The creation of the act is not denied; it is situated.

The resulting contrast is what justifies the presence of Islam in this article. The more divine causal sovereignty is protected, the harder it becomes to remove God from the causal structure of evil; the more created autonomy is strengthened, the harder it becomes to preserve total divine causality. This is no defect of one school: it is the general form of the problem, exhibited with uncommon clarity because the two positions were developed to the end and in direct confrontation.

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[13] Binyamin Abrahamov, "A Re-examination of al-Ashʿarī's Theory of *Kasb* according to *Kitāb al-Lumaʿ*", *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, v. 121, n. 2, 1989, p. 210–221, presents *kasb* as a deliberate intermediate position and traces al-Najjār's influence upon it. The argument here is not that the doctrine is empty — a polemical thesis not verified — but that its continued reinterpretation is a datum about the difficulty of the position.

A methodological result should be drawn from this, rather than recorded as an incidental difficulty. Within the occasionalist framework the levels distinguished in section 2 cease to hold apart: without second causes, proximate causation collapses into the ground, and the distinction between causing proximately and permitting can no longer operate in the terms in which it operates within a metaphysics of secondary causes. The grid presupposes genuine secondary causation, and Ashʿarism denies it. This does not invalidate the comparison — it shows where the grid stops working, and why. And it shows too that this article's question does not vanish there: it changes shape, ceasing to be a question about permission and becoming a question about the justice of an agent who is the immediate cause of everything, which is precisely how the tradition put it.

There remains the textual datum that is, for this article's argument, the most eloquent of all.

In the Qurʾānic narrative Iblīs refuses to prostrate himself, is expelled — and then *asks for respite*. He asks at 7:14, "grant me respite until the Day they are resurrected"; and receives at 7:15, "indeed, you are of those reprieved". The scene recurs at 15:36–42, with the term fixed "until the Day of the appointed time", and at 38:79–83. At 17:61–63 the formulation is still more direct, and at 17:64 the authorisation is given in the imperative: "incite whomever of them you can with your voice, and assault them with your cavalry and your infantry". The limit is equally explicit, and stands in the immediately following verses — 17:65, 15:40 and 15:42, 38:83: over the chosen servants there will be no authority.[14]

What this means in terms of the grid is immediate. Moral authorship is Iblīs's; the proximate causation of temptation is his; and the permissive structure is not the interpreter's inference — it is in the text, with request, concession, term, and limit. Displacement here does not conceal permission: it formally institutes it. And the tradition drew the consequence rather

[14] The verses were checked against the Arabic text: 7:14–15 (*anẓirnī* / *innaka mina l-munẓarīn*), 15:36–38, 17:62–64, 38:79–81, together with 18:50 on Iblīs's status as *jinn*. Q 2:34, which addresses the command to prostrate to the angels, is the chief argument of the contrary, angelic reading, and should not be adduced in support of the former; the dispute is ancient and is not indifferent to the grid, since the angelic reading makes Iblīs a case of intra-creaturely defection analogous to the Christian fallen angel. A philological precision should be recorded: the noun *inẓār*, current in the theological literature, does not itself occur in these passages, which employ the imperative and the passive participle. On the reading of the scene as a mandate of circumscribed authority, and on the parallel with Mastema in Jubilees, see Tommaso Tesei, "The Fall of Iblīs and Its Enochic Background", in Houtman *et al.* (eds.), *Religious Stories in Transformation*, Leiden: Brill, 2016, p. 66–81. On the divine purposes in creating Iblīs, see Jon Hoover, "God's Wise Purposes in Creating Iblīs", *Oriente Moderno*, v. 90, n. 1, 2010, p. 113–134.

than avoiding it: there is Islamic theodicy that deals directly with God's wise purposes in creating Iblīs, which is possible only because the question was posed.

Let me finally record a structural parallel already established by scholarship, which links this section to the fourth: the Qurʾānic negotiation scene, in which the adversarial figure asks for and receives permission to lead astray until an appointed day, corresponds directly to Jubilees 10, where Mastema asks for and obtains that a tenth of the spirits remain under his command — both figures receiving a mandate of circumscribed authority. What recurs across traditions is not some narrative motif or other; it is precisely the form of permission.

§ 7 — Philosophical comparison

With the materials assembled, the comparison can be made strategy by strategy rather than tradition by tradition — because strategies migrate across traditions and traditions contain more than one.

The matrix below records, for each strategy, what it solves, what it costs, what the principal objection is, what the best available reply is, and what remains unanswered.

Strategy	**What it solves**	**Cost**	**Principal objection**	**Best reply**	**Residue**
Ontological independence of the evil principle	Origin: evil does not go back to the good principle	Metaphysical unity and ultimate sovereignty	The asymmetry required by eschatological hope reintroduces the choice of scenario	A limited principle does not permit but merely resists	Ahriman's destiny, which the sources leave open
Redistribution of initiative onto subordinate agents	Immediate moral authorship: the one who willed the harm was another	Almost none in metaphysics or sovereignty — its advantage and its weakness	If the agent remains an emissary, the distance was not obtained (Stokes)	The distance obtained is that of malice, not of authorisation	The authorisation, which the texts themselves stage
Privation	The ontological question: evil is not a created substance	The plausibility of the analysis in the face of pain and cruelty	It fails as analysis before failing as theodicy	The contemporary defence of the thesis in restricted form	Entire as regards permission
Created freedom	The localisation of moral authorship; blocks logical incompatibility	Showing that significant freedom demands that degree of causal efficacy	Deciding and producing an effect are distinct	The massive irregularity of the alternative world	Non-intervention in the consequences
Soul-making	Function: it gives evil a teleological role	Dependence upon a universalist eschatology	Distribution and entitlement	The universalism it assumes	Suffering that destroys rather than forms
Permission (the Thomist route)	The distinction between causing and not preventing; foregrounds the third element of the grid	Explaining why permitting is a good	The doing/allowing distinction may not transfer to the divine case	God is not under moral obligations in the sense in which we are	The status of the predication "good"
Eschatology	Destiny	The gap between	A good end does	The defeat of	Duration

Strategy	What it solves	Cost	Principal objection	Best reply	Residue
		compensating and defeating	not retroactively justify the course	horrendous evil within the victim's own life	
Sceptical theism	The inference: it denies that our inability licenses concluding that there is no justification	Generalisation of scope	The price in ordinary morality, in confidence in revelation, and in natural theology	The scepticism can be restricted by commonsense considerations	The robustness of the predication of divine goodness

None of these strategies is empty, and none is a subterfuge: each answers something, and what it answers differs in each case. The reading on which religions "invented the Devil to escape the problem" is false not out of interpretive generosity but through descriptive imprecision — it fails to distinguish what was answered from what was not.

Note further that the strategies are unevenly distributed across the four points of the grid. Ontological independence is the only one that attempts to operate upon all four points at once. Redistribution and created freedom operate upon the first two. Privation operates upon the fourth in a strict sense. Soul-making, eschatology, and permission operate upon the third. Sceptical theism is the only one whose target is the inference rather than the fact: its success is compatible with the question's remaining wholly in place, which is different from not touching it. To confuse an answer about what we may conclude with an answer about what is the case is a frequent mistake.

§ 8 — The residual problem: permission and ground

It is not claimed that God is guilty. It is not claimed that ontological dependence entails moral responsibility. It is not claimed that permission is equivalent to causation. What is claimed is more modest and, for that reason, harder to dismiss: that there are two justificatory questions — one addressed to the permissive structure, the other to the ontological ground; that neither is answered by any of the strategies examined when taken in isolation; and that both survive the full concession of everything those strategies do establish.

I formulate it in two parts, labelled by the levels the grid distinguishes, so as not to amalgamate what seven sections have served to separate. The permissive question, at the third level: even granting that the supreme principle is not the moral author of evil, why, infallibly knowing the agents' future actions and being able to intervene, does he decide not to intervene? The foundational question, at the fourth level: why institute and conserve an order in which there are defectible agents endowed with causal powers, and victims vulnerable to those powers, maintaining the laws that render harm effective? The first concerns an

omission; the second concerns acts — creating, conferring, conserving, maintaining. And within the second, two operations that the word "ground" runs together should be kept apart: knowing upon what the order depends is one thing, and justifying why that order was instituted is another. The fourth point of the grid identifies the metaphysical addressee of the question; the justificatory question put to him comes after the identification of the ground and must not be confused with it. That is why they must be put separately, and why the second is not settled by the distinction between doing and allowing.

Seven elements in all, and the decisive observation is that none of them is affected by the displacements examined. The reason is structural: all of them belong to the founding relation, and the displacements operate upon the proximate one. Transferring moral authorship to Iblīs does not alter who granted him respite. Transferring proximate causation to the free creature does not alter who conserves it in being while it acts. Establishing that evil is privation does not alter who institutes and maintains the order in which privations occur. A perfectly successful displacement at the first two levels leaves the last two exactly where they were.

There is more. A successful displacement not only leaves the question intact: it sharpens it. The more completely the proximate agent is exonerated — the more clearly it is shown that the malice is his and his alone — the more sharply the question addressed to the one who authorised stands out. The executor's independence does not transfer guilt to the one who authorises; it removes the alternative addressee of the question. This is why texts that stage the authorisation, such as the prologue of Job and the Qurʾānic passages on Iblīs's respite, are more transparent about the structure than theodicies that avoid naming it.

A precision about the category "obligation". The word is used here in the weakest available sense: the existence of a question that calls for an answer, not the existence of a duty correlative to a right. A justification is demanded; guilt is not presupposed. That distinction is necessary because the strongest reply to this entire section attacks precisely the category.

The reply is Brian Davies's and, in its most rigorous analytic version, Mark C. Murphy's: God is not subject to the moral norms to which we are subject; an absolutely perfect being is not under *requiring* reasons to prevent mundane suffering; and the argument from evil unduly presupposes that he is.[15] It should be said plainly that this reply, if correct,

[15] Brian Davies, *The Reality of God and the Problem of Evil*, 2006, and *Thomas Aquinas on God and Evil*, 2011; Mark C. Murphy, *God's Own Ethics: Norms of Divine Agency and the Argument from Evil*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017. The opposite position — that there are moral evil prevention requirements binding upon God — is defended by James P. Sterba, *Is a Good God Logically Possible?*, 2019.

does not answer this section's question: it dissolves it. And it should also be said that it has a cost, which its defenders accept: if divine goodness means desirability and not moral virtue, then the proposition "God is perfectly good" ceases to have, in the believer's mouth, the sense it has in the mouth of the one who asks. The price of the dissolution is the distance between the predicate technically defended and the predicate actually professed. This is not a decisive objection — it is the identification of what is at stake.

There is, besides, a prior question that recent literature has opened and that must be recorded, on pain of treating as settled what is not. The distinction between doing and allowing, upon which the whole strategy of permission rests, has been analysed with extreme care in moral philosophy — in terms of behavioural relevance, causal sequences, and negative and positive rights — and those analyses depend systematically upon limitations of the agent that do not apply to an omnipotent and omnipresent one: the cost of intervention, the unavailability of alternatives, immobility, distance. It is a documentable datum that the canonical ethical literature on doing and allowing scarcely applies the distinction to the divine case, and that the two literatures run in parallel. Among the direct applications located in this research, two are recent and opposed to one another: Daniel Lim holds that the difficulties of the standard analyses are aggravated in the divine case, to the point that one who says God does evil is no worse off than one who says God permits it; Ryan Kulesa proposes a counterfactual analysis specific to the divine context and holds that objections valid in the human case do not touch it.[16] The article does not adjudicate the dispute. It records that the dispute exists, that it is recent, and that the strategy of permission cannot invoke the distinction as though it were a settled datum transferable from the human case to the divine.

There remains the formulation of the comparative tension with which this article has worked, now tested rather than presupposed.

The greater the ontological independence granted to the evil principle, the easier it is to remove its origin from the good principle, and the greater the cost to a metaphysics of unity and absolute sovereignty. The greater the ontological dependence of the evil agent, the more

[16] Daniel Lim, "Doing, Allowing, and the Problem of Evil", *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, v. 81, n. 3, 2017, p. 273–289; Ryan Kulesa, "The Doing/Allowing Distinction in the Divine Context", *Religious Studies*, v. 60, n. 2, 2024, p. 302–312. As to the negative finding, it is verifiable in the entry "Doing vs. Allowing Harm" of the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, whose bibliography — covering Bennett, Foot, Quinn, Kamm, Woollard, Scheffler, McMahan, and Rickless — contains no application to the divine case, mentioning the problem of evil only once and as a linguistic curiosity.

firmly metaphysical unity holds, and the heavier the burden of explaining why the ultimate ground creates, conserves, and permits the conditions of possibility of evil.

The four axes confirm the direction of the tension, but Zoroastrianism shows that it is not a law, and the reason is instructive: independence does not eliminate the question, it merely redistributes it, because the asymmetries the Pahlavi sources in fact exhibit, and without which the eschatology attested there would be incoherent, reintroduce a choice of scenario — and a choice of scenario is a decision about who bears the cost. The tension is real and documented; that it is universal has not been shown.

§ 9 — The limit of displacement

It remains to say under what conditions a displacement is a legitimate explanation and under what conditions it merely changes the level of the problem. The criterion follows from the grid.

A displacement constitutes a legitimate explanation when the question it answers is a question of the level at which it operates. To say that Iblīs willed man's fall is a correct and informative answer to the question of moral authorship. To say that evil is not a substance is a correct and informative answer to the question of the nature of evil. To say that created freedom localises authorship is a correct answer to the question of the localisation of authorship. None of these claims is evasive, and to treat them as evasions is a misreading.

A displacement merely changes level when it is offered — or received — as an answer to a question of another level. The typical case is the answer that identifies the moral author and is offered as an answer to the question of permission. There need be no bad faith in this: the questions use the same words, and the distinction between "who did it?" and "why was it permitted?" is easy to lose sight of when both are phrased as "why evil?".

Hence the reason why answers at different levels should not be counted as answers to the same question, and it is stronger than the mere demand for rigour. It is that the sum of partial answers at distinct levels produces the *appearance* of a complete answer. A tradition possessing simultaneously a thesis about the nature of evil, a thesis about moral authorship, and a thesis about the final destiny will seem to have covered the whole ground, when it may not have touched the third level. The apparent completeness results from juxtaposition, not from coverage.

It remains to state what would count as a sufficient answer at the third level, on pain of the result being guaranteed by the form of the question. The criterion is not neutral, and should be declared as adopted rather than as given: on the justificatory criterion adopted here — drawn from the literature of the benefit-to-the-sufferer constraint, from Stump to Marilyn Adams and theodical individualism — a permissive answer is sufficient when it satisfies, for the evil in question, necessity, proportionality, and entitlement. Whoever refuses the third condition will also refuse the result drawn from it, and that should be said before drawing it.

Applied, the criterion requires separating two things that ordinary language runs together. Answering the permissive question is one thing, and several traditions do it: Thomas answers, in declaring permission willed and good; Leibniz answers, in articulating it with the double concurrence and the optimality premise; the Muʿtazila answers, in elaborating categories that justify suffering. Satisfying the criterion adopted here is another, since it requires that the good reach the victim herself — and of the strategies examined, only the Irenaean theodicy with universalist eschatology and the theology of horrendous evil defeated within the victim's own life confront it explicitly, at the price of determinate eschatological premises. The article's thesis is therefore not that the third level is unreachable, nor that no one answers at it; it is that the answers do not follow from the displacements of agency, that they require an argument of their own, and that only two of them confront the criterion at the point where it is most demanding.

There is one case in which displacement does more than change level: when it comes accompanied by a thesis about permission. That is the case of Thomas, who names it and declares it willed and good; of Leibniz, who articulates it with the double concurrence; of Hick, who subordinates it to a formative function and an eschatology. In those authors there is no displacement in the criticised sense, which is why they are the serious interlocutors of the previous section — not its targets.

§ 10 — Objections to the article's own thesis

An article built against the facility of others must submit to the same treatment. Two of the objections that follow remain partly victorious, and I say which.

First: ontological dependence does not entail moral responsibility. That agents exist and persist through another's work does not make them his instruments. Parents beget children without being the authors of their deeds; sustenance does not transfer malice. If the

article moves from the fourth level to the third, it commits precisely the error it denounces in the opposite direction.

Reply. This is granted in full, and the concession costs nothing, because the article never drew that inference — it declared it invalid in section 2 and has maintained the declaration. Ontological dependence does not establish guilt; it establishes only that there is an addressee for the question. Without it, the question "why was it permitted?" would have no one to whom it could be put. It is a condition of address, not a premise of imputation. The analogy with parents, moreover, illustrates the difference rather than effacing it: parents do not infallibly know their children's future acts, do not conserve their existence at each instant, do not maintain the laws that render their acts effective, and cannot intervene without cost. Each of these differences is one of the seven elements of section 8.

Second: God may have unknown morally sufficient reasons. The absence of a visible reason is not the presence of no reason, and the expectation that we would see the reasons of an incommensurably superior intellect is unjustified.

Reply. The force of the argument is granted against any claim that there *is no* justification — a claim this article does not make. What is claimed is that a question exists, and the existence of the question is not undermined by the possibility of an answer we do not know; on the contrary, it presupposes it. But the objection has a cost that must be recorded, and it is the generalisation of scope treated in 5.6: applied consistently, the sceptical theses also disable ordinary moral inferences, and some draw from this the practical consequence that the more extreme the suffering the less reason we would have to prevent it. This objection is therefore *partly victorious*: it successfully blocks the passage from the question to a negative conclusion, and does not block the question.

Third: significant freedom may require real risk. A freedom whose bad choices never produced any effect would not be freedom but theatre. Harm to third parties is the price of an agency that counts.

Reply. This is granted, and more is granted than was intended. The article held that deciding and producing an effect are distinct, and that is true as analysis; but it does not follow that one can fix the degree of causal efficacy that significant freedom requires. To determine that the actual degree is excessive would require a measure we do not have. The objection therefore remains *partly victorious*: the article has not shown that significant freedom could be obtained with a lesser capacity for harm. What survives is less, and it is this: the requirement that non-intervention in the consequences be treated as an autonomous

justificatory item, and not as an automatic corollary of the grant of freedom. That requirement is not met by a theodicy confined to justifying the creation of free beings.

Fourth: a causally stable world requires real consequences. Selectively suspending the effects of bad choices would produce a massively irregular world in which no agent could deliberate, plan, or assume responsibility — which would destroy the conditions of moral life itself.

Reply. This is granted, and it is the strongest objection of the set, because it explains the permanence of the causal laws without appeal to any obscure good: regularity is not one good among others, it is the condition of possibility of moral life. But note what it explains and what it does not. It explains why there *are* consequences; it does not explain their *distribution*. The entitlement test still stands: regularity is a common good, and the cost, in the cases that constitute the problem, is borne by determinate individuals who did not choose it. The objection converts a question about the existence of the causal laws into a question about the distribution of their effects — which is progress, and not a resolution. And the defender has a further reply to that conversion, which should be recorded: regularity, predictability, and generalised vulnerability may be inseparable systemic properties, so that there exists no neutral mechanism capable of redistributing consequences without altering the causal order itself. If that is so, the question of distribution is not a separate question but the same question under another name — and this objection, already the strongest, becomes stronger still.

Fifth: the analysis confuses metaphysical explanation with moral justification — but in the opposite direction from the one it supposes. The objection is the article's own instrument turned against it. Perhaps the traditions never offered moral justification; perhaps they offered metaphysical explanation, and the article is demanding of them what they never proposed to give. In that case the residue is not a failure of the traditions but an effect of an imported question.

Reply. This is granted for part of the material and refused for another, and the division is precisely the one section 8 already identified. For classical theism on Davies's and Murphy's reading the objection holds: moral justification in the required sense was not intended there, and to demand it is conceptual anachronism. But Leibniz argues that God is justified; Hick holds that the process *justifies* its cost; the Muʿtazila founds its entire position upon divine justice as an objective standard applicable to God; and the contemporary analytic literature, since the evidential formulation, is framed in terms of *moral justification of permission*. For all of these the demand is not imported: it is internal. The article does not hold one tradition to another's vocabulary; it holds each to what it itself proposes.

I add a sixth, more briefly, because it is methodological and concerns the comparative gesture itself. **Comparison across four metaphysically incompatible traditions would flatten real differences, treating as variants of one problem what are distinct problems.** It is granted that the risk exists and is serious, which is why the comparison was made strategy by strategy and not tradition by tradition. The available defence is limited: no identity among the traditions is claimed, nor any historical continuity among their solutions. What is claimed is that incompatible worlds, with irreconcilable theologies and cosmologies, faced a common condition — that agents capable of harm exist within an order someone instituted — and that the answers given to that condition can be compared as to form, without ascribing to them a common content.

§ 11 — Conclusion

The principal religious strategies examined here are neither equivalent to one another nor mere subterfuges: each clarifies a real dimension of the problem. Dualism removes the origin of evil from the good principle at the price of greater metaphysical independence, and pays that price with an eschatological tension its own sources settle only by choosing between annihilating and incapacitating. The documented redistribution of initiative increases immediate moral distance without eliminating ultimate ontological dependence — and stages the authorisation rather than hiding it. Privation distinguishes being from defect; created freedom localises moral authorship; soul-making gives evil a teleological function, at the price of an eschatology that must reach each person; the category of permission distinguishes causing from not preventing and explicitly foregrounds the third element of the grid; eschatology answers destiny; and sceptical theism limits, with good arguments, what we may infer from our inability to see.

Nevertheless, a change of causal level does not automatically constitute the solution of a question belonging to another level. So long as a perfectly good principle remains the ontological ground of the order, conserves agents and structures, and possesses the power to intervene, a justificatory question about the permissive conditions of evil remains. Displacing evil may explain who commits it, how it arises, or where it is headed; it does not follow from that, without further argument, that one has explained why that order ought to be permitted.

The question of the title therefore need not receive a simple “no”. The more precise answer is that it depends upon which dimension of evil is being explained. The thesis that

survives is this: displacing the authorship or the causation of evil may be a legitimate explanation, but it supplies, without further argument, neither a justification of permission nor an explanation of the ground of the order in which harm is possible. Displacing agency explains authorship. Displacing causation explains execution. Neither on its own explains permission, and neither touches sustenance. Whoever would answer at the third and fourth levels needs an argument proper to them — and the tradition that supplied one most clearly, the Thomist, is also the one that does not confine itself to displacing agency but thematises permission directly.

What has not been shown remains, and should be said. It has not been shown that there is no justification for the permissive structure; it has been shown that no such justification follows from the strategies examined. It has not been shown that significant freedom could be obtained with a lesser capacity for harm; the corresponding objection stands. It has not been shown that the demand for moral justification is legitimate against classical theism on the reading that denies God moral obligations; on that reading, this article's question is not answered but dissolved — and what could be done here was to identify the price of that dissolution.

What can be maintained, in the end, is a narrow and resistant thesis: the four traditions examined, separated by millennia and by irreconcilable metaphysics, produced formally comparable displacements; only one of them, the dualist, attempts to disjoin the good principle from all four points of the grid at once, and at the cost of asymmetries that make the question of the distribution of harm resurface in another form. As for the rest, the result is finer than a verdict of failure: where there are answers at the third and fourth levels — and there are, in Thomas, in Leibniz, in the Muʿtazila — they do not follow from the displacements of agency, they require an argument of their own, and only two confront, at its most demanding point, the justificatory criterion adopted in section 9. That is not a verdict against them. It is the identification of where the problem actually lies — which is less than solving it, and the condition for attempting to.

Synthesis table

	Zoroastrianism	**Judaism (Second Temple)**	**Christianity**	**Islam**
Origin of evil	Primordial evil principle, its status disputed in the scholarship	Causal reconfiguration: initiative attributed to adversarial agents;	Defection of created freedom; privation of a due good	Internal debate: acts created by man (Muʿtazila) or created by God and acquired

	Zoroastrianism	**Judaism (Second Temple)**	**Christianity**	**Islam**
		divine causality retained in texts such as Isa 45:7		(Ashʿarism)
Ontological status of the evil agent	Uncreated on Boyce's view; derived, or restricted to antagonism with the Bounteous Spirit, on Hintze's and Gnoli's; without material creation in the Pahlavi sources	Subordinate creature, member of the divine council, without independent existence	Rebel creature; evil is not a substance	Subordinate creature whose status is disputed in the exegesis — *jinn* (Q 18:50) or fallen angel (the reading of Q 2:34) — granted respite with a fixed limit
Relation to the supreme principle	Opposition; epistemic, ontological, and temporal asymmetry in Ohrmazd's favour	Explicit subordination: proposes, is authorised, executes	Subordination; second causation under divine concurrence and conservation	Subordination with textually explicit authorisation (Q 7:14 –15; 15:36–42; 17:61 –65; 38:79–83); within the occasionalist framework, however, there is no second cause and the category of permission does not apply
Proposed solution	Independence of the evil principle and eschatological defeat	Growing differentiation between God and adversarial agents	Privation, freedom, permission, greater goods, soul-making, eschatology, sceptical theism	Divine justice as objective standard (Muʿtazila) or acquisition under total sovereignty (Ashʿarism); theodical optimism
Philosophical cost	Metaphysical unity and ultimate sovereignty	Metaphysical cost not articulated in the sources; the gain as regards authorisation is nil, because the texts themselves stage it	The need to justify permission and non-intervention	Reduced causal sovereignty (Muʿtazila) or the obscurity of acquisition (Ashʿarism)
Residual problem	Tension between Ahriman's uncreatedness and his eschatological elimination; the sources oscillate between annihilation and perpetual incapacitation	The authorisation, which the texts themselves stage	The status of the predication "perfectly good" once God is denied moral obligations	Why the respite was granted, and to whom the good of the test is owed

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