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The Problem of Evil in Ibn Sina and Said Nursî

İbn-i Sina ve Said Nursî’de Őer Problemi

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The Problem of Evil in Ibn Sina and Said Nursî

Abstract: In this study I will try to show the close philosophical and theological relationship between Said Nursî and Ibn Sina in the problem of evil. Nursî has been affected very deeply from the Ibn Sina's theories and concepts. In his studies Nursî implemented many categories and concepts to explain and demonstrate theological and philosophical subjects which were under attack of modern materialistic and atheistic philosophy. The degree and scale of effecting is very evident, especially in the problem of evil and its reconciliation with God's wisdom. In this field one can treat Nursî as a pioneer figure in the transforming the Ibn Sina's theory of evil into Sunni theology in the twentieth century. To see Nursî as a pure transformer, of course, leads us to a misunderstanding, Nursî has, at the same time very new ideas, analogies and argumentations in this topic. Ibn Sina's theory of evil however continued in Shiite world through theologians, like Tûsî and Mulla Sadra, Sunni scholars weren't interest mostly in this system. In this study the similarities and differences between Ibn Sina's and Nursî's notions of evil and its reconciliation with God's wisdom will be explained.

Key Words: Evil, Theodicy, Ibn-i Sina, Said Nursî, Wisdom, Reconciliation.

İbn-i Sina ve Said Nursî'de Şer Problemi

Öz: Bu çalışmada şer problemi konusunda İbn-i Sina ile Said Nursî arasındaki yakın teolojik ve felsefi ilişki araştırılacak. Şüphesiz Nursî, sadece şer konusunda değil, diğer birçok konuda da İbn-i Sina'nın teori ve kavramlarından derinden etkilenmiştir. Nursî, modern ateistik ve materyalistik saldırılara karşı teolojik ve filozofik konuları savunabilmek için İbn-i Sina'nın teori, kategori ve kavramlarını geniş ölçüde kullanmıştır. Özellikle şerlerle İlahî Hikmet'in nasıl bağdaştırılacağı konusunda Nursî'nin İbn-i Sina'dan etkilenme düzeyi ve ölçüğü çok açıktır. Bu konuda Nursî, yirminci yüzyılda İbn-i Sina'nın şer teorisini Sünnî dünyaya taşıyan öncü bir kişilik olarak görülebilir. Şüphesiz Nursî'yi sadece bir taşıyıcı olarak görmek bizi Nursî'ye karşı haksızlık yapmaya götürür; o aynı zamanda konuyla ilgili yeni görüş, kavram ve anolojiler geliştirmiştir. İbn-i Sina'nın ilgili teorisi Şia'ya mensup teologlar ve filozoflar tarafından sürdürülürken, ilgili teoriye Gazalî, Fahreddin-i Razi ve Taftazanî gibi büyük Sünnî teologlar fazla ilgi göstermemişlerdir. Bu çalışmada şer konusunda Nursî ile İbn-i Sina'nın düşünceleri arasındaki benzenen ve benzemeyen yönleri araştıracağız.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Şer, Teodise, İbn-i Sina, Said Nursî, Hikmet, Uyumlulaştırma.

Introduction

The justification of God's wisdom is handled in philosophy as the problem of theodicy, that is, God's wisdom in the face of evil. The question of theodicy doesn't restrict to some catastrophes and unjust actions as generally expected. Still, it extends to problems such as unhappiness, guilt, loneliness, abandonment, meaninglessness, exploitation, poverty, alienation, anxiety, sickness, aging, and death. Some of these problems transcend the limitations of secular philosophy. These are entirely the obligations of theology, especially of a theology that promises everlasting life. For that reason, many secular philosophers, like Habermas, are criticized by many scholars for their lack of theodicy philosophy. Some Christian scholars, like Arens and Peukert, have added some theological arguments to the Habermasian communicative action theory to fulfill what is needed.¹

To understand the Nursi's notion of evil, we have to explain the Ibn Sina's theory of evil briefly.

1. The Problem of Theodicy

1.1. Evil in Ibn Sinâ

Ibn Sina (980-1037) was born in Afşana near Bukhara in the year 370/980 during the reign of al-Samani. At that time, Bukhara was the capital and intellectual center of the Samanid dynasty. He takes lessons from different masters and becomes a very worldwide philosopher in a short period.

Ibn Sina was precisely a pioneer philosopher among Muslims who were interested very intensively with the problem of evil and wisdom. Ibn Sina devoted many passages to this topic in his famous book *Kitab an-Nacat*.² Let us summarize the Ibn Sina's notions concerning evil and its reconciliation with God's wisdom based on the relevant book.

We should immediately emphasize that Ibn Sina didn't deal with this topic for the sake of evil itself; his main aim was to justify God's wisdom. According to Ibn Sina, God's essence and existence

¹ Rudolf Siebert J. *The Critical Theory of Religion*, The Frankfurt School, (Mouton Publisher, Berlin, New York. Amsterdam: 1985), 222; Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action* (Beacon Press, Boston, 1987), Trans. Thomas McCarty, v. 1.

² Ibn Sina, *Kitab an-Nacat* (Beirut: Dar al-Afak, 1982), 320 ff.

are perfect and excellent. Therefore, his actions precisely contain wisdom and usefulness, not evil and absurdity.

In the beginning, we have to acknowledge that Ibn Sina's philosophy is very complex and challenging to understand. To make it understandable, we should give some necessary information and explanation about his conceptions and categories concerning evil.

According to Ibn Sina, objects have some characteristics; some belong to their essence while others to their faculties. The features which belong to the essence are called 'primary perfection,' and the second ones 'secondary perfection.' The capacity of seeing, hearing, speaking, feeling, and reasoning, for instance, belongs to the essence and, therefore, can be treated as a primary perfection. The capacity of philosophizing, for example, as it does not belong to the essence, it belongs to the secondary one. In this context, Ibn Sina perceives evil as a situation of privation of individual from primary perfection, not a secondary one. He gives an interesting example reflecting primary and secondary perfection: a man's burned mouth. This man is deprived of feeling the heat and then burns his mouth by a hot meal. The privation of feeling the temperature is a privation of essential characteristics; thus, it is a kind of evil, while the action of burning the mouth is not an evil due to not belonging to the essence.

In his relevant book, Ibn Sina qualifies evil as an 'essential evil' (zatî), which relates to essence and 'accidental evil' (arizî), which does not belong to the essence. He gives in this context the example of blindness and warmth. Departing from relevant reality, Ibn Sina concludes that privation of seeing (blindness) is a kind of non-existence ('adam) but burning of one's mouth is an existence. Both of them are evil, but the former is an essential evil, the latter is an accidental evil, that is evil only concerning a specific thing or person affected by it negatively, not to all being. The warmth, however, contains given harm to a particular person or something, it is, in fact, a positive and a good thing to other beings.

1.1.1. The Categories of Goodness and Evil

For Ibn Sina, goodness and evil can be divided into five categories:

1. Absolute good,
2. Absolute evil,
3. Equality in good and evil,
4. Evil is predominant and
5. Good is predominant.

According to Ibn Sina, there is no absolute good or absolute evil in this world; what existed in this world is the combination of the greater good and lesser evil.

Ibn Sina maintains that the source of evil in this world is matter (hyle). Because matter contains potentialities in its essence, it is pure evil in itself, and for that reason, it falls into the end of the hierarchy of existence. Due to there is no potentiality in His essence and existence, God is stated at the opposite axis. Therefore, there is no evil and deficiency in God; God is the full actual and the absolute good.

The matter (hyle) is the source of all evil and deficiencies, but at the same time, it has many crucial functions in the process of forming greater goods and perfect things in this world. The reason that the matter is a vital means to all greater good is that it contains in its essence many contraries such as warmth-coldness, dryness-wetness, and hardness-softness. These contraries are the main reason to produce change, progress, multiplying and deformation in perishable things. All the higher goods and perfect items came to existence through these changes, growth, and distortions. In this process, not only higher goods but also some evils play a very vital role. Finally, Ibn Sina reaches a very significant formula here, by saying that 'giving up from the greater good by the lesser evil is a great evil'.

This formula will be taken into consideration in theological and philosophical studies by Muslim scholars to justify God's wisdom.

1.2. Sunni Tradition and Wisdom

Ibn-i Sina's theory of wisdom and evil continued in the Shiite world through theologians, like Tûsî and Mulla Sadra³; Sunni scholars were not interested in this system. Eminent Sunni scholars, like Al-Ghazalî, Fakhraddin ar- Razî, and Taftazanî, largely ignored it. Instead of strongly emphasizing God's wisdom, they employed in this context the well-known 'Three Brothers' analogy⁴ against Mu'tazila to demonstrate God's independence from all necessities. In their theological system, God's wisdom was mostly veiled and pushed into the background. Even Fakhraddin ar-Razî claimed that the number of the absurdities in the world is greater than the wisdom, in the context that he studied whether the human intellect can discover the aspect of good and evil in God's activities.⁵ As will be seen below, Nursî was a pioneer Sunnî theologian who introduced the Ibn Sina's theory of wisdom and evil into Sunnî theology. Let us study Nursî's notion of evil and wisdom briefly.

1.2.1. Nursî and Evil

Nursî (d. 1960) doesn't deal with the problem of evil to discover the essence of evil. Instead, he is interested in this problem to justify God's wisdom as Ibn Sina did. Especially in the second period of his life, to which he refers to as the *New Said*, he tried to defend the creed of Islam which was under heavy attack by modern materialistic and atheistic philosophy. To demonstrate theological and religious realities, Nursî employed Ibn Sinâ's theories and conceptions, besides contemporary scientific argumentation.

The radical and dangerous atheistic ideas attacking on religions in modern times concentrated on the problem of evil and suffering, such as war, terrorism, catastrophes, illnesses, death, and so forth. Departing from these suffering radical atheists and materialists blamed God as a brutal being.

Besides his substantial effort to demonstrate religious principles, like God's existence, the possibility and reasonability of resurrection and prophethood, Nursî has spent much attempt to

³ Mulla Sadra, *Al-Hikmat al-Muta'aliyah fi'l-Asfâr al-Arba'ah*, v. 7, (Beirut: Dar Ehia al-Tourath al-Arabi, 2002).

⁴ Al-Qadî Adudiddin, *Al-Mavakif*, v.8, (in the book *Sharhu'l Mavakif* As Sayid Sharif al-Curcani, (Beirut: Dar al Kutubu'l Ilmiyye, 1998), 218; Al-Ghazali, *Kitab al-Mustasfa*, v. 1, (Beirut: Al-Risalah, 1997), 111.

⁵ Fakhr al-Din al-Razi, *Al-Matalib al-Aliya*, v.3, (Beirut: Dar al-Kitab al-Arabi, 1987), 289.

justify God's wisdom in the face of evils.⁶ In his studies, Nursî employed Ibn Sina's formulas, like 'greater good-lesser evil' and 'evil's non-existence', on the one hand; on the other hand, he developed many new arguments and analogies in this topic as we shall see below. The main distinction between Ibn Sina and Nursî is that Ibn Sina's conceptions and categories were abstract, while Nursî's are very concrete and easy to understand.

First of all, Nursî developed a critical argumentation using the distinction between creating (khalq) and acquisition (kisb) instead of Ibn Sina's dichotomy between 'primary perfection-secondary perfection.' This argumentation may be as an equivalent of Ibn Sina's 'substantial evil and incidental evil'. According to Nursî, the creation is God's action, while the acquisition is the action of the human being. For Nursî, the creation looks to the general and the universal aspects of things, while the acquisition looks only to the concrete and specific one. For that reason, the creation of evil is not evil itself, but the acquisition of actions, like persecution and murder, is evil.

Nursî gives some detail using the Ibn Sina's well-known analogy of fire and rain to demonstrate what the real evil is by saying that:

"For creation and bringing into existence look to all the consequences, whereas such a desire looks to a particular result, since it is a particular relation. For example, there are thousands of consequences of rain falling, and all of them are good. If some people receive harm from the rain through ill choice, they cannot say that the creation of rain is not mercy; they cannot state that the creation of rain is evil. Instead, it is due to their ill choice and inclination that it is evil for them. Also, there are numerous benefits in the creation of fire, and all of them are good. But if some people receive harm from fire through their misuse of it and their wrong choice, they cannot say that the creation of fire is evil, because it wasn't only created to burn them. Instead, they thrust their hands

⁶ Aydın, S. Mehmet, "The Problem of Theodicy in the Risale-i Nur" in Ibrahim M. Abu-Rabi, ed., *Islam at the Crossroads: On the Life and Thought of Bediüzzaman Said Nursî* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003); Kuşpınar, Bilal, "Death in Nursî's Thought", in *Theodicy and Justice in Modern Islamic Thought, The Case of Bediüzzaman Said Nursî* (Ashgata, 2010).

into the fire while cooking the food through ill choice and made that servant inimical to themselves.”⁷

Nursî just distinguishes between God’s decisions and actions and those of human beings. God’s works address all beings; instead, human activities aim at some specific issues. An individual evil is a result of misusing human free will, as will be studied below.

Nursî deepens his analysis concerning evil, maintaining that something may be perfect, but we may not see their perfection because we have no capacity to penetrate into the real essence of the events.⁸

Nursî gives some concrete examples to relevant reality: 'stormy rain.':

“Beneath the veil of the stormy rains and the muddy soil in the season of spring, smile innumerable, beautiful flowers and well-ordered plants. And behind the veils of the harsh destruction and mournful separations of autumn is the discharge from the duties of their lives of the amiable small animals, the friends of the coy flowers, so as to preserve them from the blows and torments of the events of winter, which are manifestations of the Divine Might and Glory, and under the veil of which the way is prepared for the new and beautiful spring.”⁹

Indeed, Nursî’s analogy of 'stormy rains' and 'muddy soil' is a new explanation of the natural evil that never exists in descriptions of Ibn Sinâ. Starting from relevant reality, Nursî implements this to Adam and Eva's expulsion from Paradise. Adam’s being expelled from Paradise and some people’s being sent to Hell is seen as evil at first glance, but in fact, this is a productive issue. Because, this process can be treated in the perspective of Ibn Sinâ’s law of ‘greater good and lesser evil’. But there isn’t any argumentation in Ibn Sina’s work to the justification of Adam's expelling from Paradise and sending some people to Hell. In this subject, he only says that the situation of the people in the Hereafter will be similar to their situation in this world. As well-known in this world a very small number of people have a very high statue in terms of

⁷ Nursî, Bediüzzaman Said, *The Letters*, Trans. Şükran Vahide, (İstanbul: Sozler Publications, 2010), 59.

⁸ Nursî, Bediüzzaman Said, *The Words*, Trans. Şükran Vahide, (İstanbul: Sozler Publications, 2008), 240.

⁹ *Ibid*, 240.

happiness, wealth and comfort; similarly, the number of people who live in very bad condition is minimal. Instead, the majority of people are living in a modest station. According to Ibn Sina, God's compassion requires that the majority of people will be sent to Paradise; only minimal people will go to Hell.¹⁰

Instead, Nursî develops a very different argumentation to justify Adam's expelling from Paradise and sending some people to Hell:

“The wisdom of it concerns the charging of duties; Adam was sent charged with such a duty that the unfolding of all mankind’s spiritual progress and the revealing of all mankind’s potentialities and man’s essential nature being a comprehensive mirror to all the Divine Names, are the results of it. If Adam had remained in Paradise, his rank would have been fixed like that of the angels; man’s potentialities would not have unfolded...That is to say, just as Adam's expulsion from Paradise was out of pure wisdom and pure mercy, so too, is that just and right that the unbelievers be sent to Hell.”¹¹

What is understood from the above passage is that Nursî does believe in the productivity of the challenge which comes from the environment. Without challenge, there is no progress and evolution. Only by challenging, human potentials can actualize. It is valid not only in the human world but also in the animal world. In this topic, Nursî reminds us of the interrelation between animals, like hawk and sparrow. The challenge of hawks to sparrows is very productive and efficient because, through this challenge, the sparrow's abilities unfold and become very active and dynamic.

In the same way, due to the existence of Satan, although many people will go to Hell, at the same time, some people will find a chance to progress their spiritual talents and become very virtuous men. In this context, Nursî introduces a very new argumentation, which is very different from that of İbn Sina. He handles this problem and justifies Satan's creation by comparing quantity with

¹⁰ Ibn Sina, *Kitab an-Nacat* (Beirut: Dar al-Afak, Beirut, 1982); *Isharât wal-Tanbihât*, with commentary by Tusî, v. 4, Annotation and detailed table of contents by Sulymân Dunya (Beirut: Dar al-Marif, Cairo, 1950), 28 ff.

¹¹ Nursî, Bediüzzaman Said, *The Letters*, Trans. Şükran Vahide (İstanbul: Sozler Publications, 2010), 58.

quality; quantity has no importance to quality. Nursî tries to prove his argumentation by giving an example:

“For example, if there are a hundred seeds of a palm tree and they are not put in the earth and are not watered, as a result will not undergo a chemical reaction and manifest a struggle for life; they are only a hundred seeds worth virtually nothing. But if they are watered and are subject to the struggle for life, then although eighty out of one hundred might rot due to their faulty make-up, twenty become fruit-bearing trees. Then, can you say: "Watering them was evil because most of them have rotten because of that?" Of course, you cannot say that, for that twenty have become like twenty thousand. One who loses eighty and gains twenty thousand suffers no harm and it cannot be evil.”¹²

1.2.2. Illness and Death

Nursî extends the Ibn Sina’s relevant formula to include illness and death. The issue of illness and death, however, seems to be cold and painful in appearance, but they have many positive implications and content through which illness and death may be very productive phenomena. In this subject, Nursî adds to Ibn Sina’s argumentation to treat illness and death as good factors in reality. This argument is the action of motion through which many perfect aims can be attained. Nursî says that illness is a kind of action, motion and change. They are means of perfection and goodness, whereas calm, idleness and monotony are forms of non-existence:

“In any event, calm, repose, idleness, monotony, and arrest from action are forms of non-existence, and harm. Action and change are existence and good. Life finds its perfection through action; it progresses by the means of tribulations. Life manifests various actions through the manifestation of the Divine Names, it is purified, finds strength, it unfolds and expands, it becomes a mobile pen to write its own appointed course; it performs its duty, and acquires the right to receive reward in the Hereafter.”¹³

Nursî pays attention to be aware of the importance of the time which men have. In fact, many people are not mindful of the value of the time, which continuously passes away. For Nursî,

¹² Nursî, Bediüzzaman Said, *The Letters*, Trans. Şükran Vahide (Istanbul: Sozler Publications, 2010), 60.

¹³ *Ibid*, 61.

illness, however, seems to be evil for men, but it makes it possible to awaken a conscience on the importance of time. Namely, illness slows the passing away of the time. He says in this context:

“For life departs like capital. If it yields no fruits, it is wasted. And if it passes in ease and heedlessness, it passes most swiftly. Illness makes that capital of yours yield huge profits. Moreover, it does not allow your life to pass quickly; it restrains it and lengthens it, so that it will depart after yielding its fruits. An indication that your life is lengthened through illness is the following much-repeated proverb: “The times of calamity are long, the times of happiness, most short.”¹⁴

Furthermore, Nursî tries to reveal other positive aspects of illness, borrowing some concepts from Ibn Sina, like non-existence, non-being, and nothingness. According to Ibn Sina, evil is non-existence (‘adem). It has no external existence:

“The origin of calamities and evils is non-existence. As for non-existence, it is evil. It is because monotonous states like ease, silence, tranquility, and arrest are close to non-existence and nothingness that they make felt the darkness of non-existence and cause distress. As for action and change, they are existence and make existence felt. And existence is pure good, it is light.”¹⁵

1.2.3. Free Will and Evil

Nursî sees a close relationship between the free will and some religious, moral, and natural evil. He tries to build a theology, which bases on the principle of human freedom. According to him, there is no responsibility without free will. In this theology, he emphasizes, again and again, the importance of a free will.

Man has himself brought about the evil from which he suffers by transgressing God's law through his/her free choice.

With free will, the Maturidi tradition to which Nursî generally belongs, developed an extremely fundamental understanding. It was first put forward by Sadr al-Shari'a (d. 747/1346), one of Transoxiana's ulama, which was clarified by Taftazanî in particular and favored by the Ottoman 'ulama. It guarantees "human

¹⁴ Nursî, Bediüzzaman Said, *The Flashes*, Trans. Şükran Vahide (Istanbul: Sozler Publications, 2011), 279.

¹⁵ Ibid, 279.

freedom" without putting any limitation to the Divine Omnipotence.

This understanding states that man's will is not existent; on the contrary, it is relative, and therefore it may be ascribed to men, making him responsible for all his acts. In the creation of men's actions, together with His own will and power, God included man's will and power in the cause; that is, he placed man's will as a "common" condition in the creation of man's actions. So long as man's will is not directed towards something, generally, God does not create it. There is no necessity, of course, for God. But God's wisdom requires that. In this way, He built a foundation by which man could be made accountable.¹⁶

Nursî takes the doctrine of Sadr al-Sharia and builds his free will doctrine on it:

“For sure, man’s faculty of will and power of choice are weak and a theoretical matter, but the Almighty God, the Absolutely Wise One, made that weak and partial will a condition for the connection of His universal will. That is to say, He in effect says: “My servant! Whichever way you wish to take with your will, I will take you on that way; in which case the responsibility is yours!” If the comparison is not mistaken you take a powerless child onto your shoulders and leaving the choice to him, tell him you will take him wherever he wishes. The child wants to go to a high mountain, so you take him there, but he either catches cold or falls. So of course, you reprimand him, saying, “You wanted to go there”, ... Thus, Almighty God, the Firmest of Judges, makes His servant’s will, which is utterly weak, a condition, and His universal will has it in view.”¹⁷

What is understood from the relevant passages is that many evils are the result of human free will and sins. Terror, war, exploitation, alienation, starvation even many illnesses come from humans’ misusing their free wills.

Conclusion

¹⁶ Sadr al-Shari’a, *Al-Tawdih Sharhu al-Tanqih* in Sa’d al- Din al-Taftâzânî, *al-Talwih ilâ Khasfi Hakâiq at-Tanqih*, v. 1, (Beirut: Shirkah Dâr al-Arkam bin Abî al-Arkam, 1998), 399 ff.

¹⁷ Nursî, Bediüzzaman Said, *The Words*, Trans. Şükran Vahide, (İstanbul: Sozler Publications, 2008), 483.

Ibn Sina was a Muslim philosopher who was interested intensively in the problem of evil and its reconciliation with God's wisdom. Meanwhile, he developed many concepts and principles to explain the essence of evil. In reality, he didn't deal with this problem to discover the nature of evil itself but to justify God's wisdom. One of the theories he developed to explain the essence of evil is that the existence ranges from potentiality to necessary being. As matter contains possibilities and potentialities it is stated at the end of the hierarchy of existence while God is stated at the other axis. God's essence and existence don't include any potentiality and possibility; God is fully actual. Departing from this reality, Ibn Sina concluded that the source of evil is potentiality since matter contains potentiality; therefore, matter is the source of evil.

On the other hand, due to no potentiality, God is purely good, and his actions are based on pure wisdom. Evil, however, is very inferior, but at the same time, it has many functions in this world. All higher goods and perfect things can only be formed through means of these inferior things. According to Ibn Sina, there is no absolute evil as well as an absolute good in this world. All goods are combined with some lesser evil.

Nursî differs widely from Sunnî scholars, like al-Ghazali and Fakhraddin-i Razî, following Ibn Sina's line in the problem of evil and wisdom. He introduced Ibn Sina's theories concerning evil and wisdom, into Sunnî literature and theology. At the same time, he added many new notions and analogies to the relevant heritage. Nursî tried to defend many religious principles to justify God's wisdom and justice by employing Ibn Sina's formula, like 'greater good-lesser evil,' non-existence, motion, and so forth. Through these formulas and conceptions, Nursî tried to show the reality of compassion and the wisdom which is hidden behind the veil of habit. Employing many new analogies, Nursî tried to justify religious principles, like expelling Adam from Paradise and creating the devil, sending some people to Hell, suffering many people with illnesses, deaths, and so forth. Nursî treated some evil as a human product, like terror, war, exploitation, reification etc. He emphasized human freedom and free choice.

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