Neo-Platonism, Meeting Point of Muṭahharī and St. Augustine in their Treatment of the Problem of Evil

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Abstract

The present article is an attempt to shed some light on the Neo-Platonic elements of two philosophers of the world of Islam and the world of Christianity—Murtaḍā Muṭahharī (1919-1979) and St. Augustine (354-430 A.D.)—in dealing with the problem of evil. The former was a contemporary exponent of Islamic philosophy whose point of departure was Mullā Ṣadrā's *al-Ḥikmah al-muta'āliyah* (Transcendent Theosophy). In his intellectual life, he sought to resolve the religious and intellectual problems of contemporary Muslims, and even approached theological issues in a rational manner. The latter, one of the most important Christian philosophers to have ever lived, sought to give Christianity a firm intellectual foundation in Neo-Platonism, and inspired the West for centuries.

It is well known that the problem of evil is at the heart of theodicy, an issue that concerns not only the world, but also the conception of God. The central question may be stated simply: how can both God and evil exist at the same time? To find a solution to this problem, Augustine at one point in his life took recourse to the Manichaean worldview, and considered evil as a separate entity from the Good, with a separate source. Later on, however, he became attracted to Neo-Platonism and came to consider evil as a privation of the Good. In Neo-Platonism, the Good is equated with Being, while evil is associated with privation of the Good, and thus 'non-Being'. With reference to

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Neo-Platonic ideas, both Muṭahharī and Augustine considered evil as a privation of the Good and affirmed the identity of Being and Goodness. Apart from Neo-Platonic ideas, they also independently developed their own ideas with regard to the problem of evil. Augustine approached Neo-Platonism with reference to Christianity, and in certain cases disagreed with Neo-Platonism in order to show his commitment to Christianity. Nevertheless, some Christian thinkers undermined Augustine's claim to be grounded in the authority of Scripture, and insisted that his Neo-Platonic philosophy has nothing to do with orthodox Christianity.

Key Terms: Neo-Platonism, Muṭahharī, Augustine, God, evil, good, being, theodicy

Introduction

Of all major problems of philosophy and theology, the problem of evil enjoys a special place among Muslim and Christian thinkers. It was one of the most debated issues in the history of these two traditions, eliciting many interpretations and commentaries. The main thrust of the problem of evil, one might say, is how both God and evil can exist at the same time. Since the understanding of evil necessarily has implications for the conception of God, both Muslim and Christian philosophers made attempts to explain how an Omnipotent, Omniscient and perfectly Good God could be justified in creating a world with evils.

Among Christians there are some who consider it impious to investigate the problem of evil or seek to justify God or His actions. Such people, for example, do not consider it permissible to treat the doctrine of the Trinity rationally. Others, like Gabriel Marcel, make a distinction between 'problem' and 'mystery', and remove the question of evil from the former category, regarding it not as an intellectual problem to be solved, but rather as a mystery to be confronted and lived through. A person faced with these two options, even if he is not personally acquainted with evil, may reflect upon the fact that others are, and he may then ask: why should God allow such a thing to happen? The problem of evil thus inevitably arises, and neither group offers an intellectual solution to this problem.

As far as the kinds of evil are concerned, there are basically two: moral evil and natural evil. Moral evil originates in and is related to human beings—for instance injustice, cruelty, etc. Christians trace this kind of evil to Adam's fall and original sin, according to which view

man was created finitely perfect, but in his freedom, rebelled against God and must now live under the righteous wrath and just condemnation of his Maker. In this view, all human beings are born as sinners, and endowed with a nature that is bound to lead to further sin. It is only by God's free—and to us incomprehensible—Grace that some (but not all) are eventually to be freed.[1] In contrast to human evil, natural evil is independent of human will and originates in nature—for instance earthquakes, storms, etc. Finally, one might add a third kind of evil called metaphysical evil, which is related to the finitude and limitation of the world.

Among Christian thinkers, St. Augustine (354-430 A.D.) more than others grappled with the problem of evil. His mind was so obsessed with this problem that he even took recourse to Manichaean philosophy—which considers the source of evil as separate from the source of good—in order to solve it. Later on, as an Illuminationist philosopher, he approached the problem from the Platonic viewpoint and considered evil as a privation of the Good. It could thus be said that on the problem of evil, Augustine was first a dualist; but became a monist after reading Plato and Plotinus; that is, after studying Neo-Platonic works he renounced Manichean dualism and considered Good as identical with Being.

Like Christian philosophers, Muslim philosophers including Fārābī, Ibn Sīnā, Mīr Dāmād, Suhrawardī, Naṣīr al-Dīn Ṭūsī, Mullā Ṣadrā, Sabziwārī and contemporary Iranian Muslim philosophers such as 'Allāmah Ṭabāṭabā'ī and Muṭahharī also wrestled with this problem. Almost all of them were of the view that evil is a privation of Good, and that this world is the best of all possible worlds. At the same time, each of them developed their own views in this regard, and in certain issues there were differences among them. For instance, some of them maintain that the privative nature of evil is self-evident; others sought to prove it through induction and deduction. It is to be pointed out that before modern times none of the Muslim philosophers refer to Plato directly in their works, except for Mīr Dāmād and Sabziwārī who refer to him several times. Moreover, their acquaintance with Neo-Platonic views was through the Arabic translation of the *Enneads* entitled *Uthulujia*, a work erroneously attributed to Aristotle rather than Plotinus. It is also worth noting that none of the pre-contemporary Muslim philosophers ever mention the name of Plato or Plotinus, preferring the title *al-Shaykh al-Yūnānī*. Later on, it became clear that

the *Enneads* was written by Plotinus not Aristotle.

In the contemporary period, the Iranian Murtaḍā Muṭahharī (1919-1979) more than others grappled with the problem of evil. He was an Illuminationist philosopher in his epistemology[2], and his point of departure in dealing with the problem of evil was Mullā Ṣadrā's *al-Ḥikmah al-muta'āliyah* (Transcendent Theosophy), on the basis of which he considered evil as a privation of the Good. Both Muṭahharī and Augustine are indebted to Neo-Platonism in their approaches towards the problem of evil, so it will be illuminating first to give a brief sketch of Plotinus' ideas concerning the problem of evil and then proceed to shed some light on Muṭahharī and Augustine's views.

Neo-Platonism

Neo-Platonism is a philosophical tradition founded by Plotinus, and his *Enneads* is the main textual source of this tradition. Under the influence of Plato, Plotinus explained the origin of the world in terms of three hypostases—the One, the *nous* and the soul—on the basis of which he developed his theory of emanation. Neo-Platonism also tried to reconcile the two supposedly incompatible philosophical systems of Plato and Aristotle by considering Aristotle's philosophy as an introduction to Plato's philosophy. Plotinus therefore considered himself primarily a Platonist. The Neo-Platonic tradition was also congenial to religious world-views. As a result, it was appreciated by both Muslim and Christian philosophers, and is perhaps a meeting point between them, particularly in dealing with the problem of evil.

On the basis of his philosophical system, Plotinus considers Being as identical with Good, and evil as non-Being or the privation of the Good. In his *Enneads* Plotinus writes:

> "If such be the Nature of Beings and of That which transcends all the realm of being, Evil cannot have any place among Beings or in the Beyond-Being; these are good. There remains, only, if Evil exists at all, that it be situated in the realm of non-Being, that it be some mode, as it were, of the Non-Being, that it have its seat in something in touch with Non-Being or to a certain degree communicate in Non-Being. By this Non-Being, of course, we are not to understand something that simply does not exist, but something of an utterly different order from Authentic-Being...Some

> conception of it would be reached by thinking of measurelessness as opposed to measure, of the unbounded against bound, the unshaped against the principle of the shape, the ever-needy against the self-sufficing: think of the ever-undefined, the never at rest, the all-accepting but never sated, utter dearth..."[3]

As for the cause of evil, the Neo-Platonist response is that evil represents the dead-end of the creative process in which the Supreme Being has poured out its abundance into the innumerable forms of existence, descending in degrees of existence and goodness until its creativity is exhausted and the vast realm of existence borders upon the empty darkness of 'non-Being'[4]. Plotinus identifies the fallen soul's engagement in its material body as the cause of the evil that it both suffers and commits. "This bodily kind", he says, "in that it partakes of matter, is an evil thing. This matter is both non-Being and Being." According to John Hick, Plotinus' system pictures evil simultaneously in a positive and negative light. There thus seems to be a contradiction in his approach towards the problem of evil.[5]

Plotinus often speaks of matter as evil,[6] and of the soul as suffering a "fall"[7]. He equates evil with matter and states:

> "Given that the Good is not the only existent thing, it is inevitable that, by the outgoing from it or, if the phrase be preferred, the continuous down-going or away-going from it, there should be produced a last, something after which nothing more can be produced: this will be Evil. As necessarily as there is something after the First, so necessarily there is a last: this last is Matter, the thing that has no residue of good in it: here is the necessary of Evil."[8]

The great lesson Christianity had to learn from the Platonists was the meaning of 'God is Spirit'. The idea of a timeless and incorporeal Being was accepted by the church, but not without much difficulty. Tertullian is still materialistic and even Augustine believed, before his conversion, that Christianity was committed to the doctrine that God has a body. The acceptance of Greek idealism necessarily modified the beliefs about the future life.[9]

Muṭahharī's Views

Murtaḍā Muṭahharī (1919-1979) was a prominent and leading contemporary Iranian thinker who during his carrier sought to find reasonable solutions to the philosophical and religious problems faced by Muslims. He was a versatile writer and wrote books in various fields. As already stated, Muṭahharī's philosophical worldview is Mullā Ṣadrā's Transcendent Theosophy, a system that synthesizes not only various schools of Islamic thought in addition to Neo-Platonism, but also encompasses the three primary paths of human knowledge: revelation, demonstration, and mystical vision; or according to another terminology *al-Qur'ān, al-burhān,* and *al-'irfān.* Mullā Ṣadrā's epistemology is directly related to the Illuminationist epistemology of Suhrawardī, which makes a distinction between conceptual knowledge and presential knowledge (*al-'ilm al-huḍūrī*).[10]

As for the problem of the evil, Muṭahharī treated this problem in his *Adl-i ilāhī* (*Theodicy*). Though this book is devoted primarily to issues concerning theodicy or divine justice, as a preliminary, Muṭahharī was obliged to clarify his view of evil, in which the integrity of God's Goodness and the universality of His Rule are involved. Indeed, the problem of evil and its attempted resolution are at the heart of theodicy—a Greek word composed of two terms, *Theos* (God) and *dike* (justice)—whose goal is the defense of God in the face of the facts of evil. The reality and perfection of God both as the ultimate Being and Power, and as Infinite in Goodness and Beauty are at stake in the issues theodicy and the problem of evil.

Generally speaking, revealed religions believe that God is Omniscient, Omnipotent and the Absolute Good. The existence of evil, however, seems to contradict these assertions. As a response, Muṭahharī insists that there could be no evil in God Himself, so that whatever evil may be, it neither comes from God nor detracts in any way from His Majestic Sovereignty. In his *Adl-i ilāhī,* he states that the philosophical response to the problem of evil contains three parts:

1- What is the nature of evil? Does evil possess real existence or is it merely privation, and relative?
2- Are good and evil separable? If the response is 'yes', then is the world, on the whole, good or bad? That is, does evil dominate the world or does good? Or do both share their presence in the world equally?

3- Regardless of all forgoing assumptions, is evil in its nature totally evil without possessing any goodness or does it contain a certain good? Or is it the basis of good covertly?[11]

Evil as Privation

With reference to Neo-Platonism and Mullā Ṣadrā's ideas, Muṭahharī maintains that evil has no real existence but is simply privation of the Good. His treatment is rooted in Mullā Ṣadrā's Transcendent Theosophy, particularly in his *magnum opus al-Asfār al-arba'ah* (*The Four Journeys*), where Ṣadrā treats the problem of evil extensively in a way that draws strongly from Neo-Platonism while at the same time being profoundly original. Ṣadrā offers the following observations on the problem of evil in the *Asfār*: "Being is Pure Good and there is no virtue or value except ontological Good".[12] "Verily Being is Good and evil is privation"[13]. "Verily matter is pure evil in which there is no good unless accidentally"[14]. "Good dominates over the World".[15]

In line with Mullā Ṣadrā's views, Muṭahharī refers to evil as privation of the Good, while never denying the existence of evil. Evils such as blindness, deafness, injustice, death, and earthquakes most certainly exist, and it is fallacious to argue that since evil is a privation of the Good, it does not exist; and moreover that man is not responsible for rising up against evils in pursuit of the Good. On the contrary, Muṭahharī says: "I never intend to deny the existence of evils such as blindness, deafness, injustice, poverty and illness etc. Nor do I wish to exempt people from undertaking responsibility or to overlook the role of man in changing the world and determining his fate. The point is that these evils are privations or voids ('non-Being'), and man is duty-bound to eradicate the defects, fill the gaps, and compensate the shortcomings."[16]

According to this analysis, man should not only try to trace the origin of evil in the world, but he should also devote his efforts to tackling the concrete problems of evil that exist in the world. Moreover, since there is no dualism in this perspective, one faces the further difficulty that good and evil in the world are not absolutely separate. In this connection, Muṭahharī says: "Good and evil are not two distinct things in the world, like solids and plants, or plants and animals, each of which possesses distinct properties. It is wrong to assume that 'bad' is a particular part of a thing with a particular evil property, without also having goodness in its nature, or vice versa. Good and evil are

intermingled with each other. They are inseparable, that is to say, wherever there is good in the world, there is evil as well. Their inter-relation is so close that one could say they have entered into a profound combination with each other. This combination is not a chemical combination, but a sort of fine and profound combination of Being and non-Being."[17]

Now, it can be said that good and evil are like Being and non-Being, and thus profoundly intertwined, but since non-Being is nothing in itself, it can hardly stand against Being. When evils are said to be non-existent, what is meant is that they have no 'real' existence. Moreover, some evils are only indirectly non-existent, i.e. not not-existent in themselves but the cause or origin of the non-existence of other entities, as in the case of germs, diseases, savage beasts, stinging insects, etc. Other evils are non-existent in themselves, as in the case of ignorance, poverty, and death—ignorance, for example, being simply the absence (non-existence) of knowledge, and poverty being merely the absence (non-existence) of wealth. Neither have any 'real' existence. Moreover, since there is a causal relation between these two kinds of evils—the latter (ignorance, etc.) giving rise to the existence of the former (germs, flood, etc.)—in order to combat the former, one should try to remove the latter.[18]

Evil as Relative

In his book *Adl-i ilāhī*, Muṭahharī makes another useful distinction in the concept of relativity, in one sense opposing relativity to absoluteness, and in another sense opposing it to reality; he then concludes that it is the second sense of relativity that applies to evil. One the one hand, all possible things—including both evils and goods—are relative in the first sense, i.e. they are relative existence in relation to Absolute Being. When it comes to the relativity of certain evils, however, it is the second sense of relativity that is more applicable. In order to make this point clear, we may refer again to the classification of evils, according to which some evils are privation and non-existent in themselves, while others are the origin or cause of such evils, thus paving the way for the rise of privation and non-existence. Muṭahharī is of the view that the former—e.g. ignorance, poverty, weakness, etc.—are not relative, but real evils. The latter, however, are indeed relative evils. For instance, the poison of a snake is a relative evil, since it is good for the snake and causes its health, but it is evil for

others and causes their non-existence.

To further clarify this view, Muṭahharī invokes another classification. He divides existence into two kinds: existence 'in itself' and existence 'for others'. He maintains that existence-in-itself constitutes the reality of each entity. Evil only arises when we consider the case of existence-for-others. Thus, the poison of a snake when related to the snake itself is good. But in so far as the other is concerned, the poison is evil and causes non-existence.[19]

Evils and Theodicy

In considering evil as privation of the Good, Muṭahharī denies two separate sources of good and evil in the world. However, this view is not strictly concerned with divine justice. That is to say, as a reply to the dualistic approach towards the problem of evil, it is related primarily to the first part of theodicy, not the second (i.e. divine justice). Muṭahharī is of the view that from the perspective of Divine Justice the problem of evil assumes another form. Here it has nothing to do with the duality or oneness of the source. Regardless of the approach one takes to source of evil, the question raised here is why are there defects, void, non-Being, etc. in the world at all? Why is one person blind, another deaf, and yet another handicapped? Here, it is not sufficient to say that they represent a privation of the Good and non-Being. The question is why Being has been replaced by non-Being at all? Is it a kind of the detachment of Divine Grace? Is detachment of Grace a kind of injustice? Wouldn't God be more just if He eliminated the gaps in the world that constitute human suffering?

In this regard, Muṭahharī raises two questions: 1- Is it possible to eliminate these evils from this world? In other words, is it possible to have a world without such evils or are they inseparable parts of the world to the extent that their absence is identical with the absence of the very world? 2- Is there any good and benefit behind evils or what are called defects in the world to the extent that without them there will be a kind of chaos and disorderliness in the world and good would fail to realize?

Like other Muslim philosophers, Muṭahharī believes that despite the existence of all kinds of evils, this world is the best of all possible worlds, for it involves great good. He holds that the existence of the world is possible only in this form.[20] He further states that the world of nature is replete with conjunctions and disjunctions, cuttings and

joining, scissoring and tailoring, and this is a necessity of the particular constitution of the world. The stuff of the world is like an asset; andlike an asset, which may be invested in order to yield a profit, the involvement of the stuff of the world through certain 'divine' formula certainly will yield a profit and will lead the world towards perfection.[21]

St. Augustine's Views

St. Augustine (354-430 A.D.), perhaps the most influential Christian thinker to have lived, made attempts to reconcile Christian theology with Platonic metaphysics. In the 3rd and 4th centuries A.D., there was much friendly exchange of ideas between Christian thinkers and Alexandrian philosophers (including the Neo-Platonists), but it was through Augustine that the stream of Neo-Platonic influence flowed strongly into Christian theology. Augustine become convinced of Platonism, and through the latter came to Christianity. His early writings are steeped in Plotinus, whom he knew in Latin translation, and some of the most famous passages in the *Confessions* harken to the *Enneads*. Even later in his life, when the philosopher in Augustine was almost extinguished by the bishop and Church Father, the influence of Neo-Platonism upon his theology persisted.[22]

Augustine sought to approach philosophical and theological problems from the vantage point of a Christian Neo-Platonist, the problem of evil being one of his central concerns. Throughout his career, from his earliest to his last writings, Augustine sought a convincing solution to this problem, even taking recourse to Manichaeism for a short time. According to Copleston, Augustine found an answer to the Manicheans when he encountered the doctrine of 'evil as privation' in the thought of Plotinus.[23] Of all Augustine's works, *The City of God, The Confessions,* and *The Enchiridion* treat this problem most extensively. Nevertheless, Augustine does not treat the problem in a separate section or a single place, so what follows is a collection and reconstruction of his ideas.

Evil as Privation

The Manichean worldview ascribed existence to both good and evil and settled the problem of evil by considering two distinct sources of good and evil. This became unacceptable to Augustine, for it entailed a misleading conception of God and detracted from His Sovereignty. In *The City of God* Augustine states that the evils of the world are nothing

"...but darkness in themselves because deprived of their participation in the eternal Light. For evil has no nature of its own. Rather, it is the absence of good which has received the name 'evil'."[24] Here we see the traces of the Neo-Platonic view that would regard evil as a privation of the Good and thus non-existence.

It is to be pointed out that Augustine here does not deny the existence of evil, but only insists that evil is not an entity in its own. Moreover, if evil is a privation and not a positive thing, one is no longer faced with the choice of either ascribing moral evil to the good Creator or of inventing an ultimate evil principle responsible for evil. This doctrine was adopted by the Scholastics generally from Augustine on and finds adherents among a number of modern philosophers of note, such as Leibniz.[25]

Now, if Augustine is in agreement with Plotinus in considering evil as privation, he perhaps nevertheless disagrees with him on the question of the coming-to-be of evil. Unlike Plotinus, for example, Augustine does not attribute the coming-to-be of evil to matter. On the contrary, he believes that the whole of creation, including the material world, is good,[26] created by God out of nothing (*ex nihilo*). This world also contains different kinds of things, including matter, some higher and some lower on the scale of being. It might be said, therefore, that Augustine is an exponent of the doctrine of the gradation of being.[27] But if all levels of existence are good, it might then be asked, where is the place of evil? Augustine's response is the following: evil is not any kind of positive substance or force, but consists rather in the "going wrong" of God's creation in some of its parts. Evil is essentially the malfunctioning of something that in itself is good.[28]

We have talked about the source of evil, or evil as a privation of the Good, but one can also ask about the origin, cause, or the "why" of evil. On this issue, Augustine rejects the Neo-Platonic view that evil is a metaphysical necessity, inevitably appearing where Being runs out into Non-Being. Rather, he attributes all evil, both moral and natural to the wrong choices of free rational beings. He says: "An evil will, therefore, is the cause of all evils."[29] In other words, the cause of evil is the defection of the will of a being who is mutably good from the Good which is immutable. This happened first in the case of angels and, afterwards, that of man.[30] In a section of his *Confessions*, Augustine insists that free will is the cause of evil human actions.[31] Indeed, the original sin is considered to be the main cause of evil and the source of

the further punitive evils of pain and sorrow. In Book xii of *The City of God* entitled "What is the cause of the blessedness of the good angels, and what is the cause of the misery of the wicked angels", Augustine writes: "The truest cause of the blessedness of the good angels is that they cleave to Him Who supremely is. And if we seek the cause of the misery of the wicked angels, it rightly occurs to us that they are miserable because they have forsaken him Who supremely is, and have turned to themselves, who have no such supreme existence. And what else is their fault called than pride?"[32]

Augustine's view concerning the origin of evil in the world may be summarily stated as follows: evil is caused by pride, the beginning of human sin; and it does not have its cause in any external force pushing or pulling the soul, or leading it astray. It does not therefore have an "efficient cause", but only a deficient cause, for evil has no positive cause in the world, only the negative cause of human pride.

Identity of Good and Being

According to Augustine, "every entity, even if it is a defective one, in so far as it is an entity, is good".[33] This idea is also rooted in Neo-Platonism according to which the ultimate One radiates its nature to create the universe, the latter being an extension of what at its source is both Being itself and the Good itself. The descending emanations of the One are thus increasingly attenuated forms of that Being which is also the Good. But Augustine also rejected the Platonic cosmogonic idea of "emanation" in favor of the Christian doctrine of creation out of nothingness (*ex nihilo*).

Augustine developed an independent view of the origin of good and its gradations in the world. According to his view, a being possesses certain attributes, the most fundamental of which are measure, form, and order:

> "These three things, measure, form and order, not to mention innumerable other things which demonstrably belong to them, are as it were generic good things to be found in all that God has created, whether spirit or body....Where these three things are present in a high degree there are great goods. Where they are present in a low degree there are small goods. And where they are absent there is no goodness. Moreover, where these three things are present in a high degree there are things great

> by nature. Where they are present in a low degree there are things small by nature. Where they are absent there is no natural good at all. Therefore, every natural existent is good."[34]

Thus, for Augustine, to exist is to have the good qualities of measure, form, and order; and everything that exists has them in its own manner and according to its own level in the rising scale of good. God, of course stands at the pinnacle of Being and Goodness. For both Augustine and the Neo-Platonists, God is the Absolute Good, Beauty, and Being. Since the creative work of the Omnipotent Good, unhindered by any material or opposing forces, is wholly good, the dramatic picture that Augustine bequeathed to later ages is that of a universe created out of nothing, consisting of the richest possible diversity of creatures, each of which is good, but occupies its own level or grade in the rising scale of goodness.

Conclusion

Muslim and Christian philosophers in dealing with a great number of philosophical problems, particularly the problem of evil, have developed very similar solutions as a result of the constructive exchange between them in the Medieval period. Scholastic philosophers in the Medieval west such as Thomas Aquinas, Albert the Great, and the followers of Averroes, on the heels of one of the great translation movements of Arabic philosophical works, benefited from Ibn Sīnā, Ibn Rushd (Averroes), and other Muslim philosophers and scientists in their respective fields. In a similar way, Muslim philosophers benefited from Ancient Greek philosophy through the great translation movement of works into Arabic.

Murtaḍā Muṭahharī and St. Augustine were heirs to this shared philosophical and theological tradition, and consequently both share a number of philosophical doctrines, particularly in dealing with the problem of evil, in which they were greatly influenced by Neo-Platonism. The problem was so pressing to both of these thinkers that Muṭahharī wrote an entire book on it, and Augustine sought a proper solution over many years of his life. Both of them were committed to religious tenets and were therefore compelled to find solutions incorporating their respective conceptions of God. St. Augustine first took recourse to Manichieanism, but after some time renounced its dualist worldview and settled upon Neo-Platonism.

Augustine reconciled the Christian belief of *creatio ex nihilo* with the Neo-Platonic doctrine of evil as a privation of Good and the world as a graded reality of goodness. In this mission he succeeded, and inspired Western thought for several centuries.

Augustine's assimilation of Neo-Platonic ideas in treating the problem of evil caused certain Christian thinkers to reject his claim to be grounded in the authority of Christian religious texts. John Hick, for example, distinguishes Scripture and religious creeds from the interpretive assumptions that Augustine makes in reading them, and denies that the authority of the former automatically transfers to the latter. He distinguishes authoritative texts from the philosophical assumptions with which Augustine explicitly or implicitly combines them. Hick insists that Neo-Platonic philosophy—with its fundamentally metaphysical understanding of good and evil, its principle of plenitude and the great chain of Being, and metaphysically necessary natural kinds—is logically independent of anything that can be found in the Bible, and therefore does not inherit the authority of scripture. So Hick rejects the idea that any orthodox Christian would necessarily have to accept the Augustinian treatment of evil.

Muṭahharī, a contemporary exponent of Islamic philosophy, grappled with the problem of evil in one of his major books, and like Augustine was greatly indebted to Neo-Platonism. Muṭahharī's philosophy, however, is rooted in Mullā Ṣadrā's Transcendent Theosophy, and his inheritance of Neo-Platonic ideas is through the intermediary of Ṣadrā. Mullā Ṣadrā's solution to the problem of evil was indebted to Neo-Platonism, though he was an independent philosophical mind, well-versed in Quranic teachings and various Islamic schools of thought.

There is a long historical separation between St. Augustine and Muṭahharī, but both of them were indebted to Neo-Platonism in their approaches towards the problem of evil. They considered evil as a privation of the Good and possessing only relative reality; the world, as the creation of God (ultimate Being and Goodness), is therefore wholly good, and consists of various levels of goodness. Evil on the other hand is simply the absence and good, an absence which our two thinkers expressed in their own ways, Augustine in terms of the cardinal sin of pride, and Muṭahharī in terms of relativity and existence 'for others'.

Notes

1. John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. 201.
2. In his epistemology Mullā Ṣadrā inclined towards Suhrawardī's school of Illumination, a school in which a distinction is made between acquired knowledge and presential knowledge. According to this school both these kinds of knowledge are unified in the being of the highest grade of knowers.
3. Plotinus, *Enneads*, trans. Stephen McKenna (London: Faber & Faber Ltd., 3rd ed., 1962), V.1.
4. Plotinus, op. cit., pp. 40-41.
5. Ibid., p. 42
6. Plotinus, op. cit., 11, 8.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, ed. James Hastings (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark Ltd., 1917), Vol. ix, p. 318.
10. S. H. Nasr, *History of Islamic Philosophy* (Arayeh Cultural Institute, Tehran, 1996), Part 1, p. 644.
11. M. Muṭahharī, *Adl-i ilāhī* (24th edition, Ṣadrā Publication, Tehran, 2006), p. 123.
12. Mullā Ṣadrā, *al-Asfār* (Manshurat Mustafawi, Qum, 1368), V. 1, p. 22.
13. Ibid., p. 340.
14. Ibid., V. 3, p. 40.
15. Ibid., V. 6, p. 372.
16. Muṭahharī, op. cit., p. 126
17. Ibid., p. 127.
18. Ibid., p. 129.
19. Ibid., p. 132.
20. Ibid., p.152.
21. Ibid., p. 171.
22. *Encyclopedia of Religions*, p. 318
23. Frederick Copleston, *A History of Philosophy* (Image Books, New York), V. 2, p. 100.
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