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Evil and responsibility in the Quran

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Abstract

The Quran contains numerous references to evil and some of these indicate that the responsibility of some instances of evil, which I call self-inflicted evil, lies with human beings rather than God. This idea of evil leads to an exploration of two interconnected issues in philosophical and theological discussions, moral responsibility and desert, along with the related tension between freedom of action and divine determinism. The article delves into this tension as it appears from the Quran and prevailing standpoints in Islamic theology. I propose that the tension between freedom of action and divine determinism resists a satisfactory reconciliation, which ultimately affects the plausibility of the idea of evil as self-inflicted. I further propose that embracing the contradictions arising from verses expressing freedom and responsibility, on the one hand, and those indicating divine determinism, on the other, could be a viable approach for the theologian.

Keywords: responsibility; evil; divine determinism; freedom

Introduction

Islam rests upon beliefs in God (Allah) and the divine origin of the Quran. To comprehend the nature of God, Muslims are bound to deeply engage with Scripture. This undertaking is, needless to say, profound and demanding. The Quran presents various, at times conflicting, depictions of God. While some of these diverse portrayals may still lead to unified beliefs, debates concerning their precise explanations persist. For instance, God's oneness is indisputable, yet the mode of God's oneness remains elusive and subject to distinct explanations. Other divine properties manifest with even greater disparities that challenge the pursuit of uniformity. These characteristics have imposed significant responsibilities upon Muslim theologians throughout history.

In recent times, there has been a growing interest in developing the scope of Islamic theology by employing analytical philosophical tools and resources to doctrinal claims about God and His relation to the world as stemming from the Quran (as well as the prophetic tradition of hadith).[1] This enterprise demonstrates an openness to embracing both the 'procedural mode', which engages the Quran in a dialogue with philosophical concepts to establish logical connections and verify validity, and the 'substantive mode' which seeks to systematize the 'content' of Islamic theology as well as 'deduce' theological content (Abdelnour 2023).[2] The present article proposes to contribute to this evolving enterprise by focusing on the Quran's account of God's relation to evil. The objective is not merely to offer a philosophically informed discussion of this account and its underlying conundrums but also to deduce and rationalize a *possible* theological outlook.

As it appears from the Quran, the world contains no pointless evil or suffering. Evil states of affairs (suffering included) can be subsumed into two main types on the basis of their role within the scheme of God's rulership. Some evil occurrences serve beneficial purposes, such as testing people in order to multiply rewards (e.g. Q 47:31), fostering spirituality and devotion (Q 2:155), achieving greater goods, or preventing greater harms (Q. 18:79–82). Others, which will be the focus of this study, strictly serve a retributive function. Evil occurrences of this sort are *deserved* consequences of human actions. They are self-inflicted in the sense that their responsibility primarily rests with human beings, not God.

How compelling is this conception of evil? Addressing this question entails delving into a multitude of issues, a task too extensive for a single study. Here I narrow the focus to moral responsibility and desert, addressing it against the conflict between libertarianism and divine determinism. To substantiate the idea that some evil states of affairs are self-inflicted/punitive consequences of human actions, it becomes crucial to derive from the Quran a perspective on human actions that aligns with theoretical criteria for moral responsibility and desert. One essential criterion is freedom. To be held accountable and deserving of retributive consequences of their actions, individuals must be genuinely free. Actions, deeds, and intentional states must remain entirely within the control of the human agent, unencumbered by divine intervention. A close examination of the Quran reveals that the freedom criterion can be convincingly supported, but it can also be readily challenged.

On the one hand, a libertarian perspective is evident in verses that introduce the concepts of *taklīf* (religious obligation) and divine justice concerning both worldly and otherworldly judgments (e.g. Q 2:56; 18:29; 50:45; and 84:6–9). These concepts suggest the legitimacy of responsibility and desert due to the availability of freedom. On the other hand, a contrasting line of divine determinism manifests in verses describing God's attributes and relation to the world. In numerous verses, God is affirmed to be the absolute Agent; the real Cause whose will determines every detail in the world, including the course of human actions and intentional states (e.g. 22:70; 6:59; 33:38; 10:100; 3:145; and 57:22–23).

Evidently, the latter line poses challenges to libertarianism, ultimately weakening the Quran's account of evil occurrences as being self-inflicted. The objection is straightforward: if God is the absolute Agent that governs everything in the world, does this not imply that we have no control over our actions? In that case, what serves as the basis for the retributive consequences that follow?

Here, we confront a theological dilemma: divine determinism challenges the requirements for moral responsibility and desert, as well as the Quran's account of self-inflicted evil. However, libertarianism is no straightforward solution either. While it lends credibility to the account of evil in consideration, it compromises the conception of God as the absolute Agent. Arguably, there is a negative correlation between human and divine actions: the greater our freedom and control, the narrower God's domain of authority becomes. Each perspective carries its own implications. It is no surprise that Muslim theologians have devoted extensive efforts to reconciling these perspectives.

This study considers a departure from common attitudes within the Islamic tradition. It suggests that it could be more theologically adequate to accept both the libertarian and deterministic perspectives, rather than attempting to reconcile them. This suggestion relies on a consideration of the possibility that the Quran may, in fact, be advocating a theological outlook that inclusively embraces divine determinism and libertarianism and that endorses their respective entailments with respect to moral responsibility/desert and self-inflicted evil. To give the proposed suggestion a credible perspective, I delve into an analysis of Quran 4:78–79 from which it will become clear that these consecutive

verses simultaneously assign the responsibility for evil to both people and God in a way that entails lending equal weight to both divine determinism and libertarianism. I explain how, by adopting a contradiction-tolerant approach, these verses can be seen as offering a justification for a theologian to transcend extensive and inconclusive one-sided discussions. Within the binary framework of Quran 4:78–79, a theologian is likewise licensed to preserve the idea of self-inflicted evil, despite the difficult challenges posed by divine determinism.

The article proceeds in the following order: the first four sections delve into reflections in the Quran regarding God's relation to evil, establishing the idea that certain evil instances are retributive consequences of human actions. These sections provide a definition of responsibility and desert, which connect to the idea of self-inflicted evil, and emphasize freedom as a central criterion. Within these sections, I address verses that respectively support freedom and divine determinism, explaining the conflicting conclusions these verses yield regarding the plausibility of the ideas of responsibility and desert and self-inflicted evil. After that, I engage with some harmony-pursuing approaches found in the Islamic tradition and highlight some of their problematic aspects. In the last two sections I propose a contradiction-tolerant approach as a potential answer to the challenges posed by the issue at hand.

God and evil

The conflict between evil and belief in God is a prominent theme, not only in philosophy and theology, but also in the Quran, which encompasses clear references to a challenge that the pervasive existence of evil in the world poses for faith.[3] Recognition of the conflict between evil and faith is mirrored, for example, in verses describing a state of wavering faith, where the extent of pleasure and luxury, bestowed by God, serves as the parameter for the strength of one's faith. Some people place trust in God as long as He extends His gifts. They persistently supplicate to Him for prosperity, but when misfortune afflicts them, they fall into despair. Hopelessness replaces belief for them (e.g. Q 41:49; and 89:16). As anticipated, the Quran condemns this form of faith contingent upon satisfaction, encouraging people to maintain steadfastness in the face of adversities. Nonetheless, the Quran does not prescribe steadfastness as a merely rigid imperative, ignoring the psychological and rational challenges arising from evil. Instead, it dedicates many occasions to accounting for its pervasive existence in the world.

Various explanations that support widespread theodicies can be constructed based on different Quranic contexts.[4] Some contexts give rise to a portrayal of a world in which God's wisdom, which underlies all aspects of the creation, effectuates events to accomplish certain ends of which some are beneficial to human beings. This image of the world makes it reasonable to believe that evil serves ultimate good reasons. Examples of benefits stemming from the presence of evil in the world include spiritual elevation (e.g. Q 2:155), increased rewards in compensation for endurance (e.g. Q 47:31), and achieving greater good or preventing greater harm (Q 18-79–82). The benefits of evil occurrences may eventually transpire to us or, in some cases, remain forever beyond our full understanding.[5]

The Quran's reflections on evil were developed by many theologians, most notably the *Muʿtazilites*, into intricate arguments supporting the purposeful nature of God's actions and commandments (e.g. ʿAbd al-Jabbār, *al-Mughnī* v.6 210–14; and v.13 19–26).[6] Conversely, other theologians resisted this form of theodicy-based explanations, contending that attributing a purpose to God is inappropriate, as it implies that God acts to fulfil specific objectives. These theologians argue from the premise that God's sovereignty is absolute and beyond questioning. They believe that seeking reasons or excuses for the

diverse ways in which God oversees the world constitutes not only an affront with respect to God but also an act of disobedience (al-Ghazali, *Iḥyā ʿUlūm al-Dīn* v.4, 40–42).[7]

Another notable account of evil in the Quran focuses on negative traits found in humans, such as injustice, ingratitude (Q 14:34), disquietude (Q 70:19), hastiness (Q 21:37), weakness (Q 4:28), and ignorance (Q 33:72). Due to these traits, human beings are bound to cause universal adverse circumstances affecting all humanity. They also give rise to specific evils that affect individuals exhibiting these traits.[8] Evils as such serve a punitive function: they are retributive consequences of an individual's misconduct, intransigence, violation of divine/ethical norms, extravagance, and abuse of God's gifts. In this context, evil may be perceived as a *self-inflicted* punishment: 'Whatever strikes you of disasters, it is for what your hands have earned' (Q 42:30; cf. 42: 48).

The extent and scope of self-inflicted evil vary. Some adversities affect specific individuals, while others manifest as large-scale calamities affecting entire societies and ethnic groups: 'And Allah presents an example: A city which was safe and secure, its provision coming to it in abundance from every location, but it denied the favors of Allah. So, Allah made it taste the envelopments of hunger and fear for what they had been doing' (16:112). Furthermore, some adversities that may appear to us to stem from purely natural circumstances are, in fact, retributive consequences of human deeds:[9] 'Corruption has appeared throughout the land and sea by [reason of] what the hands of people have earned so He may let them taste part of [the consequence of] what they have done that perhaps they will return [to righteousness]' (30:41).

The idea that some evil circumstances are self-inflicted, in the discussed retributive sense, faces questions. An immediate question pertains to God's fairness in executing punishments: Are self-inflicted evils commensurate with the offensiveness of the occasioning actions? If an agent p performs an act x and in response to x God inflicts p with an adverse situation y, is the severity of y proportional to the offensiveness of x? To answer these questions, whether affirmatively or negatively, we must be able to (1) identify the specific states of affairs that fall into the category of self-inflicted evil, (2) possess knowledge equivalent to God's to be able to calculate all relevant factors, and (3) share the same criteria for evaluation with God. Clearly, none of these conditions is feasible; therefore, evaluating the fairness of self-inflicted evil would be impossible. The Quran's affirmation that 'God does injustice to no one' (Q 18:49; cf. 41:46) may find persuasive grounds in the perceived gap between God and human beings.

However, it is hard to be convinced of any sense of fairness or justice if it turns out that God has control over human actions. Suppose x justifies y, how can we be sure that p appropriately deserves y? The question here revolves around the authenticity of moral responsibility and desert, rather than the proportionality of y and x. If our actions are subject to judgments by God, on any scale of evaluation, and if these judgements determine the adverse consequences that befall us, does this not imply that we are responsible for our actions before God? Now, let us delve into an investigation of how the Quran addresses the question of responsibility.

Defining responsibility and desert

What does it take for an agent to be responsible for an action and deserving of its evil outcomes?

In philosophy, there exists a debate over the nature and conditions of responsibility. This article adopts the traditional 'merit-based' conception of responsibility, which appears to me to align with the Quran. In light of this conception, a person is responsible for an action if that person is an appropriate subject for reactive attitudes such as indignation, respect, resentment, love, and respect, as well as reactions associated with moral

desert, such as reward and punishment and praise and blame (Strawson (2010), 24). To be appropriate for a particular reaction implies deserving or meriting it. This appropriateness is contingent upon meeting 'epistemic' and 'freedom-relevant' conditions (Fischer and Ravizza (1998), 12). It is the latter condition that I am particularly interested in here.

One significant element often found in explanations of the freedom-relevant condition is 'free will' (van Inwagen 2008). It is important to clarify that 'free will' is not a distinct faculty called will but rather a characteristic of actions described using terms such as 'can' and 'able' to pursue (van Inwagen 1989, 400). With reference to responsibility, the freedom-relevant condition dictates that the actions of a person must be free. Nonetheless, there is no unanimous consensus on what precisely constitutes freedom of action.

According to one widespread explanation, influenced by the *Principle of Alternative Possibilities* (PAP), freedom of action necessitates control that involves having alternative possibilities.[10] In light of this, an agent p is responsible for x and deserves the entailed moral desert only if p could have done otherwise; for example, not-x or any other action among a range of alternative possibilities.

On the other hand, another explanation, which parts ways with this notion of leeway libertarianism, posits that freedom of action merely requires that the agent be the source of the performed action (Pereboom 2008). The meaning of 'sourcehood' varies among philosophers. Some philosophers describe a strong idea of sourcehood, in which an agent must be the 'true' and 'ultimate' 'author or originator' of an action (Strawson 2010). Others endorse a weaker idea, requiring that the mechanism that 'issues in actions' is the agent's own mechanism (Fischer and Ravizza 1998, 39, 45–6).

Either way, it remains a fundamental premise in the traditional conception of responsibility that responsibility hinges upon freedom of action, which entails the availability of some sort of control over one's actions. This control is the essential justification for moral responsibility and desert. As Lucas (1980, 197) lucidly puts it: 'People ought to be done by according to how they deserve, and how they deserve depends on how they have done, which in turn presupposes responsibility and freedom.'

A rough version of leeway libertarianism, as explained in terms of PAP, emerges from several Quranic contexts which present human beings as moral agents possessing control over their actions and intentional states. When an individual performs an action, there exists the possibility that she could have done otherwise. Similarly, if she adheres to a given doctrine, there is the potential for her to have refrained from subscribing to it or have embraced an alternative doctrine. This inherent libertarian quality renders us responsible for our actions and beliefs before God and deserving of the diverse range of adversities that afflict us in this world and those that await us in the afterlife:

> And Say, 'The Truth is from your Lord, so whoever wills – let him believe; and whoever wills – let him disbelieve.' Indeed, We have prepared for the wrongdoers a fire whose walls will surround them. [. . .] Indeed, those who have believed and done righteous deeds, indeed, We will not allow to be lost the reward of any who did well in deeds. (18:29, 30)

From the Quranic perspective, then, leeway libertarianism holds true. Every potential action or intentional state remains open, and it falls upon human agents to decide their path. As a result, people are held responsible for their actions and choices, both in practical and in doctrinal aspects, and in deserving whatever bad outcomes they entail: 'Allah does not charge a soul except with that within its capacity. It will have the consequence of what good it has gained, and it will bear the consequence of what evil it has earned' (2:286).

This conception of responsibility also resonates in verses expressing the concept of religious obligation (*taklīf*) in which it is implied that human beings possess the capacity to apprehend God's commands and the freedom to choose between obedience or disobedience when acting upon them, rendering them subject to God's judgment.

From one perspective, the inherent connection between obligation, freedom, and people's liability before God holds such profound rational, religious, and ethical significance that it would resist a reasonable refutation. This is especially evident when viewing the doctrine of divine justice through the lens of Muʿtazilite theologians. As they earnestly argue, it would be unjust for God to hold people accountable for their actions or reward or punish them if they lacked freedom of action. Knowing that injustice is fundamentally distant from God, for He embodies absolute justice,[11] and given that it is unethical to demand people to do what they lack control over, it is reasonable to believe that God must have granted people the 'power' and 'will' necessary to choose either obedience or disobedience when facing divinely ordained obligations. Anything less would be a violation of the protocols of justice (ʿAbd al-Jabbār, *al-Mughnī*, v.11, 309; and 376–378).

Building upon this ethically oriented understanding of *taklīf*, which aligns with the tenor of the libertarian verses discussed above, it can be concluded that human beings (1) have *genuine* control over their actions, and (2) are legitimately responsible and deserving of punitive consequences that follow due to their actions. Let us formulate the Quran's vision of evil as self-inflicted, accordingly: *p* is responsible for an action *x* and deserves its adverse outcome *y*, because *p* has genuine control over *p*. In other words, *x* is up to *p*, and therefore *p* deserves *y*. If God inflicts *p* with *y*, *p*'s suffering is, in this context, self-inflicted. The primary responsibility lies with *p*, not God, who, in this scenario, oversees all relative factors and executes what *p* rightfully deserves.

As convincing as this vision of self-inflicted evil may seem at first, its plausibility dramatically diminishes when we take into account other aspects of the scheme of the God–world relationship. Many facets of this scheme present the unyielding challenge of divine determinism. Let us now address this challenge within the context of the Quran.

Who is the (true) agent?

Philosophical discussions of moral responsibility and desert are often linked to the problem of free will and determinism.[12] Traditionally, it is argued that if the world is deterministic, the free-will thesis does not hold.[13] This denial comes with a cost for merit-based responsibility, which, in this context, emerges as a groundless ethical conception. Despite the conflict, some philosophers maintain that free will and determinism can coexist as viable theses (McKenna and Justin 2021). Others find the tension unresolvable and advance arguments in favour of incompatibilism (e.g. Ginet 1983; and van Inwagen 1983, 182–188).[14]

In addition to natural determinism, freedom and merit-based responsibility encounter a more daunting challenge when God enters the picture. This is because many aspects of God's relation to the world give rise to what is known as divine/theological determinism, the view that whatever occurs in the world is determined by God. The exact manner in which God determines worldly affairs is a topic subject to various explanations.

One explanation conceives of the mode of divine determinism in terms of causal primacy. To say that whatever occurs in the world is determined by God is tantamount to saying that God is 'the sufficient active cause of everything' (Pereboom 2005, 77).

Another explanation conceives of the mode of divine determinism in terms of the primacy of God's will. White (2016, 79) writes: 'There is no detail of the universe that is undetermined by God's will.' This also applies to 'contingent facts about human will, or

about what humans would freely choose in such-and-such circumstances'. All these 'can be explained, completely, as the results of what God willed'.

Both explanations can easily find an accommodation within the Quran. That God is the cause of the world and all that it includes is unequivocally affirmed in the Quran:[15] 'Allah is the Creator of all things, and He is, over all things, Disposer of all affairs' (Q 39:62). Affirmations of God's causal primacy extend to the realm of human actions: 'Allah created you and that which you do' (37:96). Likewise, the Quran strongly emphasizes the contingency of all matters, from the fundamental aspects of existence to the finest details of the world and human affairs, on the will of God (e.g. 6:12; 32:13; 39:23; 36:82; cf.16:40). Even more, the object of human will (or even the will itself) is essentially dependent on the will of God: 'And you do not will except that Allah wills' (81:29).

Needless to say, this deterministic perspective stands at odds with the libertarian view that underpins merit-based responsibility and self-inflicted evil – for ease, I henceforth use the terms determinism and deterministic in referring to *divine*, rather than *natural*, determinism. With the Quran attributing supreme will and causal power to God, it implies that there is no true agent in the world besides God. Human will, if it indeed exists, is fundamentally contingent on God's will and/or causal power. This prompts us to question if, in reality, people have control over their actions. As with most complex theological questions, the Islamic tradition presents different visions, each carrying implications for the concepts of responsibility/desert and self-inflicted evil.

Driven by pronounced deterministic elements in the Quran, some Muslims, known as al-Jabiriets, outrightly denied human possession of freedom altogether, contending that we are constantly under compulsion in everything (for descriptions of this attitude, see al-Shahristani, *al-milal wa al-Niḥal*, 99; Averroes, *Manāhij al-Adellah*, 224). Clearly, the Jabiriets's deterministic view undermines the principle of divine justice, to say the least, and presents numerous existential puzzles about the purpose of human existence and efforts in life. Ultimately, it entails reducing the Quran's affirmations of people's responsibility for their actions and God's promises of just rewards and punishments to a mere façade.

To avoid these implications, many Muslim scholars searched for ways to restore a reasonable extent of freedom whereby responsibility may be sustained. Nonetheless, strong deterministic elements continued to inform a large scope of attempts to this effect.[16] One such attempt is that of Ashꜥari theologians which aimed to secure 'a middle-ground' solution through the theory of *kasb*, acquisition (this is how Averroes describes the Ashꜥari solution; see his *Manāhij al-Adellah*, 225).[17] Advocates of this theory retain the previously discussed causal aspect of divine determinism, while proposing that human agency and freedom, hence responsibility, can both be endorsed without compromising the dominance of God's agency. To do so, they argue that all actions, though created by God, are earned by human beings. Supposedly, the act of earning is what appropriately renders people accountable for their actions and subject to reward and punishment in the way the merit-based conception of responsibility dictates. Proponents of *al-kasb* still insist that God remains *the* true Agent in the entire world: this is so since He is the only agent that *freely* chooses and causes. Indeed, while human beings acquire acts created by God, they may not be considered true agents simply because the ability to acquire created acts is not inherent in them. Just like anything else in the world, it is instantaneously created by God.[18] Al-Ghazali writes:

> God created (*khalqa*) and produced creatures and He brought into existence (*awjada*) their capacity and movements. Accordingly, the actions of His creatures are created by Him and are contingent on (*mutaꜥaliqah*) His power . . . That God is the originator of people's actions does not rule out their being brought into effect by people by way

of earning (*iktisāb*). God created the power and its effect (*al-maqdūr*) together and cre-
ated the choice and the chosen (*al-mukhtār*) together . . . The action of a person,
though acquired by him, is certainly willed (*murādan*) by God. (al-Ghazali, *Iḥyā
ʿUlūm al-Dīn*, v. 1, 126–127; my translation)

Further affirming God's absolute authority, al-Ghazali absolves God of ethical commitments
towards people. That 'obedience', 'disobedience', 'belief', and 'disbelief' are essentially
rooted in God's will does not interfere with justice (al-Ghazali, *Iḥyā ʿUlūm al-Dīn*, v.1; and
v.4, 40–42). The reason is simple: it is not at all injustice for a King to rule His kingdom
in whatever way He wills (al-Ghazali, *al-ʾiqtiṣād fī al-iʿtiqād*, 162). This attitude, which aligns
with the ethical volunteerism espoused by Ashʿari theologians,[19] obscures a conundrum
that is even mirrored in the Quran concerning the conflict between divine will and humans'
ability to freely act or hold beliefs. For example, the Quran depicts how polytheists, when
brought to punishment in the afterlife, invoke God's will as an excuse for their polytheism:
'Had Allah willed, neither we nor our forefathers would have worshipped anything other
than Him, nor prohibited anything without His command' (16:35). Clearly, the plea is not
unfounded; it is true, from the Quran's perspective, that God's will determines everything.
Human affairs are by no means an exception: 'And had your Lord willed, those on earth
would have believed – all of them entirely!' (10:99; cf. 6:35; and 11:118).

So, if God primarily wills and/or causes what we choose to do from the range of alter-
native possibilities, God turns out to be the author of all actions. What, then, is the ground
for the punitive (evil) consequences of people's actions/beliefs? The discussed elements of
divine determinism strongly challenge the idea of self-inflicted evil, rendering God, not
human agents, *the* true (casually) responsible Agent for actions and their consequences.[20]

Omniscience and predetermination

Let us assume that the theory of *kasb* (or similar theories) could possibly allow for inte-
grating moral responsibility and desert into the framework of the causal aspect of divine
determinism. To illustrate, suppose we consider a weak version of the sourcehood criter-
ion employed by some philosophers in explaining the freedom-revelation condition for
responsibility, suggesting that control involves the requirement that the agent be the
source of actions. Viewing the theory of *kasb* accordingly, a human agent *p* can be
regarded as having control over an act *x*, and thus as being responsible for *x*, particularly
because *x* is issued via a mechanism that exists in *p*, regardless of whether that mechan-
ism inherently exists in *p* or instantaneously exists in *p* upon God's creation of it. In this
framework, the responsibility for *x* lies with *p*, and *p* deserves *x*'s adverse consequences.
Pragmatically, employing a minimal criterion for control shifts away, albeit *defeasibly*, the
responsibility for human actions from God to people, thereby according to the idea of self-
inflicted evil a chance to withstand one of divine determinism's challenges.

However, the suggested pragmatic explanation confronts another potent aspect of div-
ine determinism: divine omniscience. A widely discussed tension between divine deter-
minism and freedom sprouts from the following consideration: if God possesses
knowledge, His knowledge must be perfect. Perfection, in turn, entails fundamental prem-
ises regarding its scope and mode (Pike 1965): God's knowledge is (1) eternal, (2)
all-encompassing such that its spans past, present, and future existents and events, and
(3) utterly true such that no falsehood could be associated with it. From these premises,
it follows that future events foreknown by God from eternity must be true, and this
implies that the world follows a *predeter*ministic scheme in light of which things are to
be perceived as inevitable. Human beings, construed accordingly, lack the ability to act
otherwise than what God foreknows from eternity.

In the Islamic context, the doctrine of divine omniscience is unquestionable. The Quran affirms that God is omniscient through numerous references to Him as the All-knower (*al-ᶜalīm*) and the Knower of the unseen (*ᶜālim al-ghayb*) (Q 13:9), and statements decidedly denying His ignorance of any aspect, event, or detail in the world: 'And not absent from your Lord is any [part] of an atom's weight within the earth or within the heaven or [anything] smaller than that or greater but that it is in a clear register' (Q 10:61; cf. 3:5; 6:59).

Muslim scholars typically understand divine omniscience in light of the criteria of perfection. In terms of scope, God's knowledge, being perfect and involving no deficiency, is inclusive of *all* past, present, and future existents and states of affairs. In terms of mode, God's knowledge is characterized by the unique features of eternity, self-sufficiency, and infallibility (e.g. al-Ghazali, *al-Iqtiṣād fī al-Iᶜtiqad*, 99, 137, 138, and 160).[21] Moreover, some scholars stress that God's knowledge has a causal nature (e.g. al-Ghazali, *al-Maqṣid al-Asna*; 68–67; and Averroes, *Faṣl al-Maqāl*, 61). Taken together, these features lead to a predeterministic conception of the world. Infallibility, while crucially significant, is not the sole factor; the self-sufficiency and causal nature further bolster predeterminism.

That God is self-sufficient negates God's dependence on anything outside His essence, and this applies to His knowledge. If God possesses knowledge, this knowledge cannot be derived from the known objects and events, but from the divine essence (Averroes, *Faṣl al-Maqāl*, 61; *The Incoherence*, 206–207 and 280–281; al-Ashᶜari, *Maqālāt*, 132–138; al-Maturīdī, *Kitāb al-Tawḥīd*, 300).[22] The self-sufficiency of God's knowledge goes in tandem with its causal nature. Regardless of the mode of causality in light of which it may be understood, the causal nature is such that God's knowledge serves as *the* foundation of anything that materializes in the concrete world. If we concede that human actions fall within the scope of God's eternal knowledge, the result will be a predeterministic scheme of human actions.[23] If God knows from eternity that *p* will commit a crime *x* on 12 June 2024 at 4 p.m., then *p* will commit *x* in on 12 June 2024 at 4 p.m. There is no possibility that *p* will refrain from committing *x* or do otherwise, since that possibility, if it became true, would reduce God's eternal knowledge to falsehood or ignorance.[24]

The discussed features of divine omniscience and their deterministic implications closely align with the Islamic doctrine of *al-Qaḍāʾ wa al-Qadar* (often translated as Predestination and Decree).[25] This doctrine, rooted in the Quran's references to the Preserved Tablets (Q 85:22) and the Book of the Unseen (Q 24:75) wherein all components and events of the world are inscribed from eternity, confirms that God determines from eternity the course of the world, be that its fixed nature or its secondary causes and effects, and the specific times, circumstances, and features of each state of affairs (for this 'religious' definition of *al-Qaḍāʾ wa al-Qadar*, see al-Bayhaqi, *al-Qaḍāʾ wa al-Qadar*, 57–58).[26] Even if we were to deny that God, or His knowledge, directly or indirectly causes human actions, the *al-Qaḍāʾ wa al-Qadar* creed seems to leave no room for a genuine scheme of freedom where human beings would do other than that which God predetermined. For what God predetermined is executed according to the way God willed it to be – this is how the meaning of *Qadar* is generally understood in the Islamic tradition. In other words, what God predetermined:

(1) Cannot be abrogated, and
(2) Underlies everything; nothing within the scheme of divine predetermination can fail to materialize, and nothing outside it can occur.

These characteristics are not solely analytically perceived; they form a fundamental Islamic dogma, supported by consensus-held sayings among Muslims that 'Everything comes from God's predetermination and decree' (Abd al-Jabbār, *Faḍl al-Iᶜtizāl*, 126) and

that 'What God wills shall definitely be and what God does not will shall never be' (al-Baqillānī, *al-Insāf fī ma Yajib Iʿtiqāduhu*, 42; al-Maturīdī, *Kitāb al-Tawḥīd*, 380).

In summary, the doctrine of divine omniscience, coupled with Predestination and Decree, imposes another powerful aspect of conflict with freedom, responsibility/desert and self-inflicted evil.

Applying hermeneutics

In Islamic theology, consistency serves as a typical motivation for applying hermeneutics. The Quran stresses that consistency is one of its unique characteristics that testifies to its divine origin: 'Do they not reflect upon the Quran? If it had been from any other than Allah, they would have found within it much contradiction' (4:82).[27] Scriptural interpretations provide an apparatus for maintaining the Quran's self-proclaimed consistency, and this apparatus can be permissible not only in cases of internal conflicts, but also in cases of conflict with established rational and logical premises (see, e.g. Ghazali, *Qanūn al-Taʾwīl*, 19–22; *Fayyṣal al-Tafriqah*, 41–51; *al-Shāmil fī Usūl al-Dīn*, 543–551; *Faṣl Al-Maqāl*, 35–37).[28] Methodologically, interpreters may take into account various linguistic and contextual factors such as clarity and ambiguity, scope of references, modes of speech, and implicit meanings to work out harmonized readings of otherwise conflicting verses.[29] The occasion of revelation of specific verses is another important factor that could be relied upon in harmony-pursuing endeavours.[30]

While we may acknowledge that, in principle, harmony-oriented interpretations are both feasible and theologically valuable, it can also be argued that their applicability is not absolutely guaranteed and may not be devoid of obstacles. The tension between freedom/responsibility and determinism can rightly be marked as a real example of the resistance posed by some verses to coherence. Indeed, the interpretative attempts aimed at achieving coherence provide evidence for the extent of this resistance. Efforts to effectively integrate verses expressing freedom and responsibility within the framework of divine determinism have traditionally been prevalent in major schools of Sunni Muslim theology, such as Muʿtazilism and Ashʿarism (Jackson 2009, 157–164). Despite the good intentions, these efforts often encountered numerous complexities, eventually leading to a tendency to prioritize one side over the other.

The writings of prominent Ashʿari theologians, for instance, portray a strong tendency to prioritize divine determinism.[31] Despite their proposal of 'a middle-ground' answer rooted in the theory of *al-kasb*, in application, divine determinism wins more weight, as seen above with al-Ghazali's affirmation that the acquisition of actions is contingent on God's creation of both the action and the power to acquire it. In alignment with their leaning towards determinism, Ashʿari scholars often take a reductionist approach when dealing with libertarian verses. Verses expressing freedom and merit-based responsibility are interpreted in a manner that diminishes the authenticity of these concepts. Instead of being accepted at face value, they are interpreted as indicators of how individuals acquire the actions and intentional states created and eternally willed by God that render them accountable (see, for example, al-Bāqillānī, *al-insāf fī ma Yajib Iʿtiqāduhu*, 25; 36; 41; 42; and 148). Similar interpretations echo within Maturīdism (see al-Maturīdī, *Kitāb al-Tawḥīd*, 315–321).

Unlike Ashʿari theologians, the Muʿtazilites lean towards prioritizing the libertarian side, in spite of their avowed adherence to the aspects of divine determinism. In their efforts to reinforce the authenticity of responsibility, they free human actions from God's authority and, as discussed above, appeal to the concepts of obligation (*taklīf*) and divine justice to verify the libertarian view.[32] In addition, they bring forth the principle of causation, arguing that attributing human action to God undermines the

established connection between empirical causes and effects that governs the regularity observed in the world (Abu Zeyd 1996, 216). This reasoning already compromises the causal aspect of divine determinism. Compromises of other deterministic aspects manifest in that Muʿtazilite theologians exclude intentional states from the scope of *al-Qaḍāʾ wa al-Qadar* (e.g. Abd al-Jabbar, *Faḍl al-Iʿtizāl*, 127–128), even though some verses, as discussed above, assert their inclusion in the scopes of God's will and knowledge.

To advance the cause of freedom and responsibility within the Quran's deterministic verses, Muʿtazilite theologians engaged in hermeneutical efforts. For example, some theologians base their interpretations on a definition of divine will as involving deterministic and indeterministic modes, respectively pertaining to God's actions and human actions. Objects of the first mode are inevitable such that they cannot fail to materialize as willed by God. By contrast, objects of the second are contingent on the will of the human agent. The function of God's will in this sphere of actions consists in its bestowing on human beings the ability to act. This ability is not instantaneously created, but originally constituted in human nature. Interpreted accordingly, verses that ascribe human actions and intentional states to the will of God are not taken at face value to be imposing a deterministic scheme of human actions and beliefs. Instead, they are assigned the functions of expressing the *inherent* will, power, and reason with which the divine will supplied human beings (Abu Zeyd 1996, 220–221).

As seen, scholars from the Muʿtazili and Ashʿari traditions, tending to interpret the verses in ways that align with their favoured theological outlooks, often ended up with compromises. Regardless of the theoretical, contextual, and linguistic factors considered by a theologian in deciding the outlook guiding the interpretation, it remains true that in the process of harmonizing the libertarian and deterministic aspects of the Quran one side ends up being less integrated. In the end, it may be argued that the result is not coherence, but one-sidedness.

These problematic aspects of harmony-pursuing interpretative approaches may lead us to question whether embracing the contradictions that arise from the libertarian and deterministic verses could be potentially viable as an alternative approach. Embracing contradiction is distinct from incompatibilism where the unresolved conflicts between the contents of two groups of verses would lead us to conclude that only one of them represents the objective truth.[33] Such an approach would be theologically pricey because it involves diminishing the truth value of either group of verses, instead of ensuring their full integration into Islamic theology. Although it may circumvent the conflict among the verses, it leads to partiality and eclecticism with respect to the Quran whose truth ought to be accepted holistically. Even if there are strictly rational reasons for attributing the truth to the provisions of either group of verses, favouring one aspect of the Quran over the other could hardly be praiseworthy. Surely, the Quran condemns eclectic people believing one part of the Book and disbelieving the other (4:82). While favouring one outlook over another is not equivalent to disbelieving, it remains true that interpretative approaches that fall short of *fully* integrating the doctrinal imports of all verses into Islamic theology potentially risk compromising certain aspects of the Quran. Ultimately, to avoid compromises, embracing the libertarianism/determinism conflict as it exists could be legitimate, especially considering that the conflict has shown resilience to a satisfactorily impartial solution in the theological/scriptural context.

An immediate objection to embracing contradiction would be: this approach departs from the recognition of coherence as a hallmark of the exceptional precision that the Quran proudly upholds. This objection can be answered by suggesting that coherence need not be an absolute characteristic of every aspect of the Quran. Notably, the verse cited above specifies the Quran's non-inclusion of '*much* contradiction', rather than *any* contradiction at all, as a sign of its precision and divine origin. With this in mind,

acknowledging the Quran's inclusion of an instance, or more, of contradiction does not necessarily undermine its self-proclaimed uniqueness as a divine book. Approving the libertarian and deterministic verses as an instance of contradiction, and accepting their opposing entailments for merit-based and self-inflicted evil, may thus be a valid approach. Other theoretical and scriptural considerations can be invoked to lend support to this approach, as is discussed below.

Theoretical considerations

Logic has played an important role in the Islamic intellectual tradition, and its significance emerges from different disciplines, besides philosophy and theology, such as jurisprudence, and Arabic linguistics (Walbridge 2011, 127–135). Although the early stage of Islamic theology witnessed conflicting attitudes to 'Greek-derived' modes of formal inference, later prominent theologians assimilated these modes into theological discourse (El-Rouayheb 2016, 408–412). Aristotelian logic usually supplied some of the basic rules. Most important of all is the Law of Non-Contradiction (LNC) which asserts that contrary propositions cannot be true in the same sense and at the same time (*Metaphysics* 1005b19–20).[34] In Islamic philosophy, LNC is deemed the most primary of all true statements (e.g. Averroes, *Tafsīr ma Baʿd al-Ṭabīʿah*, 39; and Avicenna *al-Burhān*, 131). Similarly, it maintained an unassailable status in theology (see, al-Ghazali, *al-Maqṣid al-ʾasna*, 34). Even fierce opponents of Aristotle and rational theology agree that contrary propositions cannot both be true at the same time and in the same sense (e.g. Ibn Tayymiyah, *al-Rad ala al-Manṭiqiyyīn*, 149–150).

Suppose a theologian adheres to LNC. Then, upon examining the propositional contents of (1) verses stressing the connection between freedom and moral responsibility/desert, including verses describing some evils as self-inflicted/retributive consequences, together with (2) deterministic verses, she would conclude that a contradiction arises between the two sets of verses. In logical terms, this contradiction would disallow the simultaneous approval of both sets of verses.

Let L represent the first set of verses. On the basis of the earlier discussion regarding the Quran's libertarian aspect, L-verses collectively convey the following propositions:

(L1) God assigns reward and punishment to people in accordance with their actions and beliefs.
(L2) People choose to obey or disobey God's commands, do good or evil things, and subscribe to or abandon right beliefs.
(L3) Accordingly, people are responsible for their actions and beliefs,
(L4) People deserve the retributive consequences of their actions and beliefs.
(L5) Some evil states of affairs are retributive consequences of people's bad actions and disbelief.
(L6) Given (L2 and 3), the responsibility of these states of affairs lies in the human agents who freely commit punishable deeds.

Let D represent the second set of verses. On the basis of the earlier discussion regarding the Quran's deterministic aspect, D-verses collectively convey the following propositions:

(D1) God is *the* Creator. He creates, whether directly or through secondary causes, everything in the world, including human actions.
(D2) God's will (or/and knowledge) is *the* principle that determines the ontological states, course, and circumstances of all things, including human actions and beliefs.
(D3) The scope of God's will/knowledge is all-inclusive, encompassing all cosmic

ingredients and everything pertaining to human affairs.

(D4) God's will/knowledge cannot be abrogated,

(D5) Therefore, what God wills (and/or knows from eternity) will inevitably be, and

(D6) Given D2, nothing that is not willed by God (and/or not registered in His eternal knowledge) can ever be.

(D7) Given (D1–6), the responsibility of evil states of affairs that afflict human sinners/disbelievers lies with God.

L-verses and D-verses entail several conflicting outlooks that may not be held together in light of LNC. Let us consider, for example, the extent of God's and people's involvement in determining human actions and beliefs (L2 and D1). When L2 and D1 are simultaneously endorsed, we end up with combined affirmations and negations of God's and people's actual involvement in determining human actions and beliefs. However, LNC stipulates that affirmation and negation of the same statement (p and not-p) cannot be true at the same time or in the same sense (Grim 2004, 50). For this reason, a theologian committed to LNC would be required to navigate her way carefully around the following disjunctives. Either it is true that:

(A) It is God who determines the course of human actions and beliefs (as entailed by D2), or

(B) It is *not* God who determines the course of human actions and beliefs (as entailed by L2).

And, either it is true that:

(C) It is the human agent that determines the course of her actions and beliefs (as entailed by L2), or

(D) It is *not* the human agent that determines the course of her actions and beliefs (as entailed by D2).

In light of LNC, a theologian may not be licensed to combine (A) and (B). Otherwise, she would be violating LNC by holding it to be simultaneously true that God is and is *not* the actual agent that determines the actions a human agent does or refrains from doing and the beliefs she subscribes to or abandons. Similarly, if a theologian combines (C) and (D), she would be violating LNC by holding it to be simultaneously true that the human agent is and is *not* the one that actually determines which actions to do or refrain from doing and which beliefs to endorse or abandon. These jointly held negations and affirmations would also result in conflicting conclusions about self-inflicted evil. It would be both true that God is and is *not* genuinely responsible for this type of evil events. Likewise, it would be both true that people are and are *not* genuinely responsible for it. Complying with LNC would, then, require a theologian to approve either (A) and (D) or (B) and (C). Yet, this means that some of the contents of either L-verses or D-verse would have to be compromised.

   As a way out, a theologian could consider the qualifications 'at the same time' and 'in the same sense' to argue that the respective propositional contents of each set of verses are true not simultaneously but in relation to specific textual, historical, and syntactic contexts. A theologian could, then, deny the presence of any essential contradictions, insisting that the entailments of L-verses and D-verses are only *seemingly* contradictory. In technical terms, a theologian may escape the implications of LNC for Islamic theology by applying the technique of '*parameterization*' where seemingly true contradiction, A $\land \neg$A, are treated 'as having different meanings, and hence as ambiguous (maybe just *contextually*

ambiguous)' (for this technique see Priest 2018). Some textual features can be helpful for a theologian aiming at this technique. Most important of all are the dispersed locations of L-verses and D-verses in the Quran, their revelation throughout different times and historical contexts, and their inclusion of complex linguistic elements. All these features, allowing for context-based readings, may result in variations in the perceived propositional contents of the verses.

Accordingly, a theologian could aim to show that contradictions arising from combining L-verses and D-verses are ostensible, rather than true, by deciding their contents on the basis of distinct contexts and by considering linguistic factors that affect the meaning. In light of this, a theologian may, for example, attribute different significations to the conceptual components of divine determinism to demonstrate that no genuine contradiction arises when combining statements affirming that God determines and creates everything in the world and that we are free moral agents justly subject to merit-based responsibility and desert.

Nevertheless, the suggested technique, although it may successfully overcome contradictions, would naturally involve hermeneutical choices that would, once again, lead to compromises. Ultimately, it falls to the theologian to decide – on the basis of how she defines the boundaries between contexts and understands the implications of different linguistic factors on the meanings of the verses – the scope and extent of divine determinism vi-à-vis libertarianism within Islamic theology and, accordingly, the theoretical feasibility of merit-based responsibility/ desert and self-inflicted evil. Even when a theologian aims to remain impartial, she may still struggle to frame L-verses and D-verses into a coherent mould without compromising the doctrinal import of either side.

Given that LNC interferes with efforts to develop a theological outlook that *fully* and *impartially* integrates the contents of L-verses and D-verses, endorsing contradictions as an alternative approach becomes an open possibility. Let us try to support the applicability of this approach on theoretical grounds, and then move to Scripture.

The restriction on combining contradictions stems from epistemological concerns, one of which is that combining contradictory premises leads to arbitrary consequences. As argued, should contradictory premises be held valid, anything could be inferred thereof. As a result, inconsistency would explode, leading to 'triviality (that is, a circumstance such that everything holds)' (Carnielli and Rodrigues 2016, 59). The Principle of Explosion (PE), which states that 'from contradiction anything follows', is dominant in classical and intuitionistic Logic. Some non-classical logical systems have presented challenges to PE. As some recent logicians have argued, classical logic 'errs in assuming that no sentence can be both true and false' (Priest 1979, 226).

Moving beyond the confines of classical logic, some logicians have recently developed sub-systems that allow for *some* paradoxical 'non-explosive' premises. These systems have found valuable applications in theology. A notable example is Beall's proposal to use paraconsistent logic in explaining the viability of the contradictory nature of Christ. This shift relies on the 'first-degree-entailment' (FDE) subcategory of logic, which encompasses classical logic models while expanding the range of acceptable models. Within the FDE framework, it is possible to accept certain contradictory claims as true without necessarily leading to an explosive system. With this appeal to paraconsistent logic, Beall argues that 'the true Christology is in fact logically contradictory'. Christ 'appears to be contradictory because Christ is contradictory', meaning that 'some predicate is both true and false of Christ, and hence some logical contradiction is true and false' (Beall 2019; cf. Beall 2021, chs 1–2).

Beall's approach has generated diverse responses both within and outside the realm of Christian theology. In a recent study of Islamic theology, Chowdhury (2020) proposes to adopt Beall's proposal as a potential means of defending the rationality of traditional

theological claims that imply a paradoxical nature of God's speech. From one theological perspective, God's speech is a divine attribute. Proponents of this perspective hold God's speech to be eternal and undifferentiated. Yet, they also acknowledge that God's speech emerges as a revealed scripture, in spite of the feature of temporality that this acknowledgement entails. Chowdhury argues that the conflict between the eternal and temporal facets of God's speech can be treated as a 'rare case' of contradictory theology: 'the affirmation of God's speech being eternal as His attribute and the Qur'an literally (actually) being this speech cannot be an accusation against the traditionalist being incoherent or speaking irrationally about God' (Chowdhury 2020, 20).[35]

Another study by Ahsan (2021) focuses on the contradiction between theological claims that God is both unknowable and ineffable, which arise from what Ahsan designates as 'a radical' notion of the God of Islam as absolutely transcendent. In this study, Ahsan argues against appealing to FDE logic as an adequate system for tolerating theological contradictions. Moreover, he contests the presence of 'actual' *logical* contradictions in Islamic theology that can replicate Beall's model. Yet Ahsan deals with the possible contradictions that particularly arise within the context of the concept of God as utterly transcendent, alternatively proposing an approach of 'non-commitment to the formal categories of truth'. This approach endorses a form of 'mystical dialetheism', which evades attempts of philosophical theorizing of an unknowable and ineffable God. Instead, it embraces contradiction as a possible *interpretation* of 'revelationary' facts, taken as matters of belief, about God. This interpretation, Ahsan concludes:

> What we are observing instantiations of contradictions that constitute relevant pieces of evidence which, at best, allows us to infer a contradictory case of an unknowable and ineffable God. In such a case, we are not observing an instance of a contradictory God Himself. Rather, we are inferring an unknowable and ineffable God pertaining to non-observable domains from instantiations of specific contradictions situated in an observable domain. Yet the truth of this contradiction is not metaphysical. Nor can it be subject to philosophical theorising. Instead, it is a dialetheia that is ultimately grounded in the mystical. (Ahsan 2022, 962)

Both Chowdhury and Ahsan propose different perspectives on the openness of Islamic theology to Beall's enterprise. However, their discussions eventually present frameworks for a theologian to address contradiction in a constructive way, instead of being driven by the urge to dissolve them. Some instances of contradiction could be tolerated within the scope of Islamic theology, on logical or mystical grounds, without necessarily resulting in a reduction of its truth value or rationality. Relying on these grounds, a theologian could find it permissible fully and impartially to endorse the contents of L-verses and D-verses, despite awareness of the contradiction they entail with reference to God's relation to human beings. For that theologian, God is absolutely involved in determining human affairs to an extent that undermines the authenticity of human responsibility, deserved consequences for their actions, and, by extension, the idea of evil as being self-inflicted. Simultaneously, God does not intervene in human affairs in any substantial way that could lead to undermining freedom, responsibility, and desert.

Scriptural considerations

Let us turn to scripture to explore how a contradiction-tolerant approach in dealing with L-verses and D-verses could be justified. It is important to stress that, theologically speaking, the Word of God is meant to be accepted as a cohesive whole (Abbas 2016, v3 54). Even though the Quran's doctrinal and legal contents were revealed in diverse historical, social,

and geographical contexts, they hold a unified significance for believers independently of these contexts. The Book is indivisible, being holistically compelling for the believer. Its episodic manifestations and diverse contexts should not affect the believer's stance towards its doctrinal content. As discussed above, one should not cherry-pick from scripture. This is why some attempts to reconcile conflicts in the Quran by appealing to contextual, textual, and linguistic factors could be problematic because they may breach the conceptual and doctrinal indivisibility of the Word of God. In other words, they run the risk of treating the propositional contents of Quranic statements not as *simultaneously* true, but as *contextually* true.

Even if we overlook this risk, context-based attempts of reconciliation may not guarantee constant success. This is especially true when dealing with contradictions arising within the same scriptural context. Same-context contradictions appear to me to spotlight the permissibility of endorsing contradictions in the case of daunting theological matters. One such case is God's relation to self-inflicted evil, and its underlying tension between determinism and freedom. The inconsistency associated with this multidimensional issue not only arises among sporadic verses and chapters, as discussed so far, but also within the same context. Two consecutive verses in the Quran (4: 78–79) exemplify the idea:

> Wherever you may be, death will overtake you, even if you should be within towers of lofty construction. But if good comes to them, they say, 'This is from Allah'; and if evil befalls them, they say, 'This is from you.' Say 'All [things] are from Allah.' So what is [the matter] with those people that they can hardly understand any statement? (78) What comes to you of good is from Allah, but what comes to you of evil is from yourself. And We have sent you, [O Muḥammad], to the people as a messenger, and sufficient is Allah as Witness. (79)

These verses present a juxtaposition of perspectives on good (*ḥasanah*) and evil (*sayyiʾah*): the first-person perspective, offered by Allah, and the third-person perspective, ascribed to an unspecified group, 'they', identified by some interpreters as a group of pseudo-Muslims (*al-munāfiqūn*) who lived during the time of the prophet Muhammad and were involved in episodes of political and societal tensions (al-Khazin, *Lubāb al-Taʾwīl* v1., 401–402).

Irrespective of the identity of 'they', their perspective seems to be rooted in assumptions about good (*ḥasanah*) and evil (*sayyiʾah*) that Allah describes as lacking understanding and for which He provides a corrective response. According to 'they':

(1) Good comes from God.
(2) Some people bring about adverse circumstances for others – 'they' ascribe any adversity that afflicts them to the prophet.

A sort of political tension may have influenced the background of Q 4:78–79. Regardless of historical details, the verses clearly furnish a frame of reference for another doctrinal tension, one that concerns the responsibility for good and evil. *Al-munāfiqūn*, or whoever 'they' are, espouse uninformed assumptions that good and evil are attributable to different sources. These assumptions, which brought them to the point of accusing the prophet of causing their misfortune, are opposed by Allah's corrective statements:

(3) Wherever you may be, death will overtake you, even if you should be within towers of lofty construction.
(4) All [things] are from Allah.

(5) What comes to you of good is from Allah.

(6) What comes to you of evil is from yourself.

As can be seen, statement 3 declares a form of fatalism.[36] The death of every individual is predetermined by God to occur (at a specific time and place), no matter how one tries to postpone or evade it. This statement does not necessarily negate freedom and responsibility, but it does serve to loosen the relationship between human choices/actions and their respective consequences. One may make auspicious choices, but the result turns out to be unfortunate, and vice versa. Our fate is not truly in our hands, but in the hand of God.

Statement 4 intensifies the fatalist tone. Furthermore, affirming that *all* things are from God entails a denial of freedom.[37] Consider that the word 'all' (*kullun*) refers to an all-inclusive domain which includes, it is valid to say, human actions and their consequences. How things come 'from God' (*min ʿind Allah*) is unspecified in the verses. Interpretations vary. In one explanation, that all things 'are from God' points to both casual and ontological dependence. According to this, God is the agent that 'causes and makes [all things] to materialize into existence' (*khāliquhā wa mūjiduhā*) (al-Khazin, *Lubāb al-Taʾwīl*, 401–402). In another explanation, the affirmation that 'all things are from God' points to not only causal and ontological dependence on God but also full embeddedness in *al-Qaḍāʾ wa al-Qadar* (al-Tabarāni;[38] cf. al-Rāzi, *Mafatīh al-Ghayb* v.3 263). Either way, there are strong deterministic implications, ultimately confirming God's interference with freedom of actions and human responsibility for evil.

Breaking with the affirmation about the all-inclusiveness of God's authority, statements 5 and 6 divide things into good and bad, specifying that only the good is from God, while the bad is attributed to one's self. The formulas 'from Allah' and 'from yourself' are open to different explanations, but the tension between freedom/responsibility and determinism persists irrespective of how one understands them. Regarding God's relation to the good, one or all aspects of divine determinism may apply, meaning that the good is caused, willed, or predetermined by God, or all of these factors combined.

That evil 'is from yourself' amounts to an affirmation of people's responsibility for the evil they experience. This affirmation reinforces the idea that some evil states of affairs are self-inflicted/retributive consequences to human actions. Indeed, the affirmation at hand involves a generalization, implying that *any* evil state of affairs one experiences is self-inflicted in the sense that its responsibility falls upon the human agent, not God. Considering the conceptual link between responsibility and freedom emerging throughout the Quran, statement 6 suggests, in contradistinction to statement 4, that human actions are inherently free. The contradiction between 4 and 6 and their entailments could not be clearer.

Many Muslim scholars point to the verses' inclusion of a contradiction (e.g. Averroes, *Manāhij al-Adellah*, 226; and al-Baqillāni, *al-Insāf fī ma Yajib Iʿtiqāduhu*, 145–146). Some hermeneutical solutions consider the possibility of the verses' inclusion of equivocal words that could be perceived as expressing particular, rather than general, states, and move therefrom to explain away the contradiction.[39] But would it not be bizarre to think that what Allah dictates as a corrective of doctrinal errors could contain ambiguous elements, eventually leading to more errors? If this were the case, Allah's response to 'they', obviously meant to provide a compelling creed for all believers, would be counterproductive, if not misleading. In such a scenario, and considering the discussed frameworks for endorsing *some* contradictions, one could accept the contradiction as it exists to be Allah's actual response.

Whether the conveyed contradictions are intended to represent strictly epistemological or ontological cases of contradictions may remain an open question.

Epistemological contradictions, stemming from shortage in human beings' cognitive and linguistic apparatus and their inability to interact appropriately with the issue of God's involvement in evil, may find easier acceptance within the Islamic context. In fact, many Muslim scholars attributed theological confusion and 'perplexity' (ḥayrah) to the inadequacy of human language to express the reality of God and His relation to the world (Heck 2014, 77–80). With this in mind, it would not be wrong if a theologian considered that, due to linguistic limitations, such contradictions manifest through the revealed Word of God and, due to our cognitive limitations and inability to overcome deficiencies, they are licensed to be accepted as they are. Alternatively, it is possible that the contradictions are meant to express an actual paradox about God's relation to people. Although this perspective is unusual, it is worth contemplating. Descriptions of God in the Quran – assuming we concede to their straightforward meanings – create puzzling instances of contradictions.[40] God is Manifest, but also Hidden (Q 57:3). God is absolutely transcendent, yet immanent. He is One, but possesses a plurality of attributes and names.[41] Of particular relevance to the present purpose is that the way of God's involvement in the world is unchangeable, 'and you will not find in our way any alteration' (Q 17:77), but also unsteady, 'everyday He is in (i.e. bringing about) a matter' (Q 55: 29). If one were to accept that God and His way contain inconsistencies, it would follow that the nature of His relation to people and involvement in evil would likewise involve features of contradiction.

Conclusion

The Quran's attempt to mitigate God's involvement in evil, by shifting the responsibility for some evil states from God to human misdeeds, faces challenges in light of contradictions arising from libertarian and deterministic verses. Departing from prominent harmony-pursuing approaches in Islamic theology, this article has proposed that embracing the contents of these verses and their respective implications for the idea of self-inflicted evil as an integral, albeit internally conflicting, outlook provides a potential alternative approach that is both rationally and theologically adequate. Such an approach may assist a theologian to overcome dilemmas in Islamic theology, without lapsing into absurdity or resulting in the reduction of the truth value of theological claims arising from the Quran. However, the application of this approach may be confined to the minimal, particularly to cases when support for its permissibility is evident in Scripture.

Notes

1 This approach falls within the ambit of Islamic analytic theology. Although tools and concepts used in contemporary IAT vary from classical discourse, the analytical project is considered a continuation of classical Islamic theology, see Moad (2018) and Abdelnour (2023).

2 Beyond theology, the analytical-philosophical approach to the Quran may also be linked to the philosophical conception of the Quran espoused by some medieval philosophers. Averroes, for example, establishes that intellectualism lies at the core of the Quran, which is, in his opinion, an accessible form of philosophical truth. While the Quran is not a strictly theoretical book, it calls people to engage in professional and systemic reflections on its fundamental principles about the world and its Cause (Averroes, *Manāhij al-Adellah* 132–155; and *Faṣl al-Maqāl*, 26–32). A similar viewpoint regarding the essence of the Quran's message was put forth by Mohamed Iqbal (d. 1938). In his view, the Quran urges humanity to turn its attention to the empirical world in order to comprehend the Ultimate Reality, which the Quran conceives holistically and which philosophy and science gradually uncover (Iqbal (2012), 16).

3 Discussions of the problem of evil typically centre on two formulations: the logical and evidential problems. These are widely used as grounds for anti-theistic arguments. For the logical problem, see Mackie (1995). For the evidential problem, see Rowe (1979).

4 In the Islamic tradition, the equivalent of theodicy is the concept of *taʿlīl*. Literally, *taʿlīl* means searching for cause or finding the logical relation between cause and effect. While *taʿlīl* is commonly used in the context of the problem of evil and suffering, it carries a broader function in the Islamic tradition; see Ghaly (2010, 5–6).

5 Some Muslim theologians emphasized the cognitive limitation of human beings to undermine the ground for attempts to form theodicies; see Ghaly (2014).

6 *Muʿtazilite* theologians fervently defended the purposive nature of God's actions to the extent that some argued that 'God created the world to benefit humankind'; see Hoover (2007, 72).

7 The anti-theodicy approach was prevalent among Ashʿari theologians. In addition to al-Ghazali, al-Razi was another advocate of the anti-theodicy approach for which he developed arguments, as discussed in Shihadeh (2019).

8 That people's deeds have a bearing on their destiny is a central theme in the Quran. This theme encompasses not only evil, but other aspects of human life in this and the next world; see Rahman (1980, 24).

9 This form of theodicy can be compared to an element in the free will defence of theism, which broadens the scope of moral evil resulting from free will to encompass natural evil; see Plantinga (1974, 92).

10 It is worth noting that, despite its prevalence, the *PAP* was criticized by some philosophers, see Frankfurt (1969); and Pereboom (2017).

11 This rationale is grounded in a normative ethical theory which sees all human beings as well as God to be subject to the same moral code. See Vasalou (2008, 4).

12 The most formidable challenges to freedom and moral responsibility arise from hard determinism. By considering human actions as an inherent part of the order of nature, hard determinists deny freedom of action altogether. See James (2005, 150); Laplace (1995, 2); Spinoza (2018, 1p32); and Honderich (1988, 51). Aligning with hard determinism, some have explicitly rejected the free will thesis as a myth; see Kadish (1968, 287); and Caruso (2013).

13 In discussing moral responsibility, some philosophers tend to bypass the tension between free will and determinism, focusing instead on the compatibility or incompatibility of moral responsibility with determinism and indeterminism. For this tendency; see Trakakis and Cohen (2008). In this article, I stick to the traditional tendency to invoke the tension between freedom and determinism, since this tension appears to me to underlie the conception of responsibility in the Quran and Islamic tradition.

14 Others go even further, advocating for hard incompatibilism which suggests that the idea of freedom required for merit-based moral responsibility does not hold even when assuming that *indeterminism* is true (Pereboom 2008). Proponents of hard incompatibilism propose different criteria for responsibility that could be accommodated into the deterministic and nondeterministic schemes.

15 Indeed, some Muslim theologians maintain that attributing any act of creation/causation to any being other than God is *shirk*, disbelief. See al-Māturīdī (*Kitāb al-tawiḥīd*, 305); and al-Bāqillānī (*al-insāf fī ma yajib iʿtiqāduhu*, 141).

16 Outside theological literature, Muslim philosophers tried to reconcile the causal aspect of divine determinism with human agency, appealing to a scheme of secondary causation in which all causes are ontologically dependent on the First Uncaused Cause: However, it should be noted that, even within this framework, the deterministic aspect of God's causal power persists. This is because the operation of every secondary cause follows from antecedent causes and effects that have their origin in the First Cause. In this sense, secondary causes and their effects are necessitated by the First cause; that is to say, they cannot be otherwise. Many scholars have argued that the metaphysical system espoused by Muslim philosophers like Avicenna, for example, imposes causal/metaphysical determinism; see Marmura (1984) and Goodman (2006, 86). The same has been suggested about Aristotle; see Sorabji (1980).

17 The theory of *kasb* had roots in the writings of early Muslim scholars like Abu Ḥanifa. See Abu Zahrah (1947, 179).

18 The mode of God's creation of human actions was also open to different explanations. For example, al-Juwayyni (*al-Shamil fī Usūl al-Dīn*, 694) asserts that the power to act is not an authentic power in man, but God-made. However, he explains this in terms of intermediary causes.

19 Ethical volunteerism defines good and bad in terms of what God wills and prohibits. Within this framework, there are no objective ethical norms against which God's acts could be evaluated. For this theory, see Frank (1983). Some Ashʿari theologians absolve God from ethical commitments towards people not only in this world but also in the world to come. If God were to decide to send all virtuous people to eternal damnation and all sinners to eternal pleasure, 'this would be perfect justice because He owed nothing to anyone', as outlined in Rahman (2000, 62).

20 In philosophy, when the authorship of evil is addressed in relation to God, one or more of the following criteria are considered: causing, determining, and blameworthiness. See Furlong (2019, 86–87). The focus here is on

the first two criteria which emerge from the Quran's deterministic scheme. Whether God is blameworthy on evil or not is a question that lies beyond the present scope.

21 The infallibility of God's knowledge also derives from the attribute of God as al-ḥaq (the Truth). In light of this attribute, God's knowledge about future occurrences and reports to the prophet cannot be subject to abrogation. See Al-Ashʿari (Maqālāt, 163–164). Another relevant feature, which is equally challenging to freedom, is immutability, especially when God's knowledge is thought to be identical with essence. Immutability entails that God's essence is unchanging, which, in turn, entails the impossibility of change in His knowledge. See Saeedimehr (2018).

22 These features of divine knowledge are agreed upon by Muslim scholars, despite the disagreement on the nature of divine attributes, whether they are states, essential attributes dependent on the divine essence, or essential attributes identical with the essence.

23 For further discussion of God's omniscience and its implication for human freedom in Islamic thought, see Adamson (2010).

24 Interestingly, even theologians who ascribe to people the ability to act freely stress that the function of this ability does not turn God's knowledge into ignorance. See how al-Ghazali (al-iqtiṣād fī al-iʿtiqad, 160) explains this point.

25 Some contemporary scholars underline a difference between predestination and determinism in Islamic philosophy and theology, associating the latter with Aristotle's conception of the world in which determinism is rooted in the inherent natures of existents, rather than God's supreme power, see De Cillis (2014, 3). Examining the extent to which this distinction might have influenced Muslim theologians falls beyond the scope of this article. Here I focus on Quranic statements and what is known to be standard viewpoints within different theological schools, rather than subtle variations.

26 The main purports of this doctrine were also endorsed by Muslim philosophers. However, they explained the mode of God's determination and decree differently depending on their theoretical commitments. Avicenna (1985, 229), for example, affirms: 'in the world as a whole [. . .] there is nothing which forms an exception to the facts that God is the cause of its being and origination and that God has knowledge of it, controls it, and wills its existence; it is all subject to His control, determination, knowledge, and will'. See also Averroes (Manāhij al-Adellah, 226).

27 While some theologians may rely on this verse to justify hermeneutical efforts to harmonize contradictory verses, others appeal to it to deny the Quran's inclusion of contradictions that would require interpretations. See Ibn Tayymiyah (Al-ʾiklīl fī al-Mutashābih, 43–44).

28 The most well-known exception is found among Zahiri scholars who accept textual statements as they are even when they contradict reason. See Abrahamov (2016, 268).

29 Muslim scholars developed varied theology-oriented and law-oriented paradigms of hermeneutics. Vishanoff (2011) offers a reconstruction of law-oriented paradigms which, as he explains, referred back to the theological paradigms from which they emerged. Clarity and ambiguity, scope of references, modes of speech, and implicit meanings are among the central issues discussed within these paradigms; Vishanoff (2011, 24).

30 Occasions of revelation (asbāb al-nuzūl) is an Islamic science that looks into the possible reasons that occasioned the revelation of certain verses and the implications of these reasons for our understanding of scripture and its applicability to broader circumstances. See Abu Zeyd (2014, 97–99).

31 It should be mentioned that differences in approaches and opinions existed within the schools of Ashʿarism and Muʿtazilism. Here I present what are known to be the general, defining viewpoints and approaches of these schools respectively.

32 The appeal to obligation is unconvincing. One may simply object that 'ought to do' does not logically imply 'free to do'. I here borrow the objection advanced by White (1993, 20) against similar ways of reasoning. It is worth mentioning that the solutions offered by Muʿtazilite theologians in favour of harmonizing the libertarian and deterministic views involve other logical problems that were to become the subject of criticism by later Ashʿari theologians and contemporary scholars. See Fakhry (1953).

33 The other group of verses could then be seen as serving a pragmatic purpose. For example, suppose we espouse deterministic-incompatibilism, we could understand the libertarian verses as aiming to instil an illusionary notion of freedom to help us retain our self-image as morally responsible agents, which is indispensable for moral living and stability. We may continue to hold illusory beliefs about freedom and responsibility, without being troubled by the reality of God's overarching and intrusive will and power. One may 'Act like someone who knows that only his acts can still save him and trust in God like someone who knows that only that will strike him which was meant for him' (Abu Hasan al-Basri, quoted from Ormsby 1984, 71). The suggested pragmatic purpose draws insight from the theory of illusionism advanced by Smilansky (2000) which suggests that, pragmatically, authorizing illusionary belief in free will is not only rational, but also 'morally necessary', given the merit of libertarian beliefs in maintaining social norms and self-valuation (Smilansky 2000, 150, 300).

34 The specific formulation of the LNC in Metaphysics is: 'the same attribute cannot at the same time belong and not belong to the same subject and in the same respect'.

35 Beyond the theological issue of God's speech, the Islamic tradition contains philosophical outlooks that show openness to being explained in light of the paraconsistent apparatus. An important example is Ibn Arabi's theory of the Oneness of Being, as has been argued by Zolghadr (2018).

36 Fatalism is the idea that human choices are ineffective and make no difference to the course of events. This does not involve the causal necessity that determinism entails for actions and choices. For this difference, see Russell (2002, 323).

37 See how al-Rāzai, *Mafatīh al-Ghayb*, v.3 264, uses this verse to offer an argument against the Muʿtazilite's defence of freedom.

38 Al-Tabarāni's *Tafsīr*: https://www.greattafsirs.com/Tafsir_Library.aspx?LanguageID=1&SoraNo=4&AyahNo=78&MadhabNo=2&TafsirNo=91.

39 For example, some take the words *sayyiʾah* (evil) and *ḥasanah* (good) to be equivocal, and assign them different meanings when interpreting 'all things are from Allah' to remove the conflict with human' responsibility for evil. See Ibn Tayymiyah, (*al-Tafsīr al-Kabīr*, v. 3 250–258).

40 How Quranic predications of God should be understood was a subject of debate in Islamic theology. The semantic problem of divine attributes and names is to be distinguished from the ontological problem, which was another hotly debated subject. See Wolfson (1976, 206) and Thiele (2016).

41 For a study of approaches in Islamic theology to contradictions arising from Quranic descriptions of God, see Kars (2019).

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