# IS GOD PERFECTLY GOOD IN ISLAM*?

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## *ABSTRACT*

*Based on a question posed by global philosophy of religion project regarding the absence of literal attribution of omnibenevolence to God in the Qur'ān, this paper aims to examine how to understand perfect goodness in Islam. I will first discuss the concept of perfect goodness and suggest that perfect goodness is not an independent attribute on its own and it is predicated on other moral attributes of God without which the concept of perfect goodness could hardly be understood. I will examine perfect goodness by a specific emphasis on the attribute of justice as one of the conditions to be satisfied by a perfectly morally good being. In so doing, I will appeal to the distinctions made among great-making properties by Daniel Hill, and Al-Ghazālī's definition of justice by applying them to God's moral attributes. I will argue that justice has a crucial role in maximality-optimality balance between great-making properties and it seems quite difficult, if not impossible, to conceive of goodness without justice. Having said that, I will claim that the conceptual frame I suggest sheds light on why omnibenevolence is not literally attributed to God in the Qur'ān. Then, I will briefly show how the divine attributes mentioned in the Qur'ān and the discussions about divine names and attributes in the Islamic tradition supports the understanding of perfect goodness I defend. Consequently, I will try to show that far from indicating that the Islamic concept of God doesn't involve perfect goodness, the Qur'ān establishes the proper meaning of perfect goodness by focusing on its constitutive attributes, and thus provides us with a sound conception of it.*

***Keywords***: *divine goodness; divine justice; great-making properties; Islam; the Qur'ān.*

## 1.     Introduction

Recently, the global philosophy of religion project[1] has aroused lively interest among the philosophers of religion by re-asking some perennial questions regarding some of the field's most basic themes. The project aims to broaden the classical theistic discourse which dominates the field and to encourage fresh insights from various philosophical or religious traditions. Thus, as it is stated on the project's website, the goal of the project is to promote different solutions to these main themes by involving underrepresented religious traditions that can be considered broadly theistic, and hence to globalize the philosophy of religion by diversifying the contributions to the field.

One of the themes in question is the problem of evil and suffering in the world. To repeat the familiar conundrum, the problem arises from the difficulty—apparent or real—of reconciling the existence of a perfectly good, omnipotent and omniscient God and various evils that we experience in the world. One specific question that is addressed under this theme is related to the Islamic concept of God and whether this concept can offer a viable solution or at least a new perspective to the problem. In a short passage allocated to Islam,[2] it is implied that we might avoid the problem of evil if we simply abandon the perfect goodness of God. That is, because we conceive of God as omnibenevolent or perfectly good, we do have great difficulty in making sense of the presence of horrendous evil along with the existence of God. Yet, a deity concept without omnibenevolence might escape from this problem. What does this have to do with the Islamic concept of God? It is claimed in the brief passage that the fundamental texts of Islam, such as *the Qur'ān* and *Ḥadiths*, do not describe God as omnibenevolent, at least explicitly. This fact inclines us to think that the Islamic concept of God can accommodate evil and hence avoid the problem. This short passage has some crass claims that need to be

[2] See https://www.global-philosophy.org/evil (24.05.2022).

elucidated at length.[3] However, I will restrict myself to seeking an answer particularly to the question posed there: Is it true that *the Qur'ān* doesn't attribute perfect goodness to God? And if this is the case, how can we understand the absence of (at least) explicit attribution of omnibenevolence?

In this paper, I will attempt to examine how to understand perfect goodness in Islam. My analysis will not be a comprehensive one in which omnibenevolence is examined by various aspects. Instead, I will seek to give a conceptual sketch that underpins the attribute of omnibenevolence or perfect goodness. I will suggest that perfect goodness is not an independent attribute on its own and is predicated on other moral attributes of God without which the concept of perfect goodness could hardly be understood. I will claim that the conceptual frame I suggest sheds light on why omnibenevolence is not attributed *literally* to God in *the Qur'ān*, arguing that *the Qur'ān* provides its readers a proper description of what it is to be perfectly good by emphasizing various moral attributes of God that are constituents of perfect goodness. In doing so, I will first analyze the concept of perfect goodness and discuss why it cannot be conceived of without other moral attributes by employing Daniel Hill's schema for

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[3] For instance, it is stated in this passage that "other schools say that even if God may not be the cause of evil, he is still capable of doing unjust deeds because being able to perform an unjust action represents perfection". To the best of my knowledge, no school of theology claims that performing an unjust action represents perfection. It is true that Islamic schools of theology rigorously discussed omnipotence and the scope of divine power, and as a part of this discussion they asked whether it is possible for God to act unjustly or if it is within God's power to perform an unjust deed. However, even the Ash'arites who claim that it is possible and hence in God's power to punish believers and permit the entry of nonbelievers into paradise, they don't claim that being able to perform an unjust deed is a perfection for him. Rather, the main question was related to the scope of logical possibility and which actions fall under that category, and to God's ability to do otherwise as a requirement of his perfect freedom. As it was widely accepted among Muslim schools of theology that God's power extends only to the edges of logical possibility, the theologians discussed whether acting unjustly is logically possible for God and hence within his power to do so. Because some Ash'arite theologians had specific reasons to argue that it is in God's power to act unjustly, they attributed to God the ability to do so. What would be imperfection for God in that case, therefore, would be his inability to perform what is logically possible, not his inability to do unjust actions. I do not aim to defend the Ash'arite position; what I seek to do is to be fair about what they really claim. Even the description above might be unfair as the Ash'arites questioned if any action could be considered "unjust" for God to do, given that they assumed that acting unjustly is to violate someone's rights as well as their priority over his/her rights and properties. However, someone cannot act unjustly unto his property. Since whatever there is, is God's property, He cannot commit unjust actions to anyone or anything in his property. Therefore, what determines just and unjust is God's action, and whatever He does is good and just. Be that as it may, as I will claim below, these discussions by no means aim to attribute injustice to God. It's understandable that the statements on the project website are meant to be thought-provoking; however, more accuracy and circumspection is expected from a project that purports to be the voice of underrepresented traditions. For a detailed discussion about divine justice in the Islamic tradition, see Ormsby (1984).

great-making properties, and al-Ghazālī's definition of justice. I will argue that the attribute of justice has a crucial role in understanding perfect goodness and it seems quite difficult, if not impossible, to conceive of goodness without justice. Then, I will briefly show how the divine attributes mentioned in *the Qur'ān* and the discussions about divine attributes in the Islamic tradition support the understanding of perfect goodness I defend. Again, my considerations about the positions of Islamic theology schools will not be a detailed one.[4] So, instead of focusing on a specific school of theology and dealing with the particular problems of their position to reveal how they understand and defend God's goodness, I will offer some general remarks to illustrate how the debates on divine justice in the Islamic tradition correspond to the disputes over perfect goodness of God without specifically endorsing or defending the position of any school. Consequently, I will try to show that far from indicating that the Islamic concept of God doesn't involve perfect goodness, *the Qur'ān* establishes the proper meaning of perfect goodness by focusing on its constitutive attributes, thus provides a sound conception of it, and the Islamic tradition echoes *the Qur'ānic* perspective of goodness.

## 2.      Perfect Goodness: The Balance of Great-Making Properties

In western theistic traditions, divine goodness has mainly been understood in two ways, in a general and a particular way which are closely interrelated. The former, the general sense of goodness, is the metaphysical goodness that identifies goodness with being. Accordingly, the mode of existence without the possibility of nonexistence is the perfect goodness. Hence, God as the pure being and the source of all existents is considered (as) perfectly good, and even (as) goodness itself. In this sense, then, God's goodness can be seen as an ontological claim (Wierenga 1989, 202) and alludes to the absolute perfectness of God's being (MacDonald 1991).

Goodness in its second and particular sense is to be considered as a specific attribute such as omniscience or omnipotence and it is counted in the list

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[4] This will leave some important details of each position as well as the application of the concept of perfect goodness I offer to particular problems untouched. For instance, one reviewer asked how the concept of goodness which consists of the harmony and balance of other moral attributes could explain the problem of hell or the fact that *the Qur'ān* offers a conditional divine love concept. I think these are important questions and the concept of goodness I propose needs to be elaborated further by answering many related questions such as the ones asked by the reviewer. Unfortunately, the space doesn't permit the discussion of those significant questions. It will suffice to say that I think the concept of goodness which is based on the idea of perfect balance and justice of divine properties is more promising than a perfect goodness concept devoid of it to meet the challenges posed by those questions. For a brief discussion of the conditional concept of divine love and its implications on God's goodness, see Yöney (2017, 172-177).

of attributes which a being must possess in order to be perfect. A perfect being must be not only omniscient, omnipotent, but also perfectly good. In this particular sense, perfect goodness amounts to being morally perfect, or being perfectly good in a moral sense. Thus, it is also associated with desires, character traits and actions of the being in question (Murphy 2014). As Murphy argues:

> A perfectly good being has the best desires that a being can have, and exhibits the best traits of character, and acts in an unsurpassably excellent way. (…) So when one says that any being who counts as God must be perfectly good, the claim is that any such being would have desires and traits of character and perform actions that are those of a being that exhibits moral perfection (Murphy 2014).

These three aspects of moral perfection are also presumed for the agency of a being. So, a morally perfect being must be a *morally unsurpassable* agent (Murphy 2014). For both general and particular meanings of the concept, divine goodness has an important role both in understanding God's creation as well as in determining the mode of relationship between God and his creation. As I will be more concerned with the particular sense of goodness in this paper, I shall begin with asking: What do we refer to with perfect goodness which might be identified with moral perfectness? In other words, what are the essential conditions of being a morally perfect agent?

Now, I will examine perfect goodness by a specific emphasis on the attribute of justice as one of the conditions to be satisfied by a perfectly morally good being. In what follows I will suggest that perfect goodness is not an independent moral attribute on its own, and that we cannot conceive of it without presupposing some other attributes.[5] In so doing, I will appeal to the distinctions made among great-making properties by Daniel Hill,

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[5] I should say that regarding the theological language, I endorse an Alstonian form of univocal predication which does not consider radical dissimilarity in mode and degree of human and divine attributes as a disincentive to have a univocal understanding of them. This, however, doesn't mean that radical differences between human and divine modes of possessing an attribute are dismissed. As Alston states, despite the differences in aforementioned aspects, there can be a core of meaning that is shared by human and divine modes of having those attributes. Again, such an account that is mainly predicated on a functionalist understanding of attributes/concepts can be adopted by voluntarists and intellectualists, though in different forms (see Alston 1989, esp. the second and third articles of the first chapter).

and to Al-Ghazālī's definition of justice[6] by applying them to God's moral attributes. I will argue that justice has a crucial role in maximality-optimality balance between great-making properties and it seems quite difficult, if not impossible, to conceive of divine goodness without justice. Moreover, by using Al-Ghazālī's definition of justice, I seek to reveal that justice has two significant implications regarding God's goodness. First, anyone who acts unjustly towards any person or being would fall short of being perfectly good. So, if there are cases in which God needs to prioritize being just over being, say, forgiving, God's perfect goodness requires him to do what is just in that case. Second, justice reflects the balance and harmony between God's moral attributes. Hence, the cases in which God deems it more appropriate to be forgiving over treating people as they deserve, He concedes justice and acts mercifully. However, in those cases, justice is at work in a different way, as God judges it to be more harmonious or appropriate to be forgiving over doing what justice—in its first sense—requires to do.

Before proceeding with Hill's distinctions, we need to briefly look at great-making properties. A great-making property can be described as follows: "any property, or attribute, or characteristic, or quality which it is intrinsically good to have, any property which endows its bearer with some measure of value, or greatness, or metaphysical stature, regardless of

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[6] There are a few things I should address about my preference of al-Ghazālī's specific work on divine names and his definition of justice that he provides in this work. Al-Ghazālī's work on divine names is one of the most well-known contributions to the literature on divine names in the Islamic tradition due to his clear and systematic style of writing in addition to giving a comprehensive explanation for each name and their relations to each other. Although there is a relatively rich literature in the Islamic tradition on divine names, the main body of explanations of the names do not usually differ in essence. Rather, it is the author's writing style and explanations of each name that makes a work preferable over others. So, I chose al-Ghazālī's work to refer to the meanings of divine names, including justice, which I will discuss at length in section 3, mainly because of the reasons given above regarding the work as well as the author's being a renowned name for most of the researchers working on Islamic theology and philosophy. Also, although I will be employing al-Ghazālī's definition of justice, it is not only al-Ghazālī who defines justice in that way. As it will be clear in section 3, the definition of justice I cite from al-Ghazālī was widely accepted among Muslim theologians from different theological branches, such as al-Māturīdī and Ibn Taymiyya. Al-Shahrastānī deems it the orthodox understanding of the term (Al-Shahrastānī, 37). Another question that may come to mind might be why this work of al-Ghazālī was chosen over his other works. One might say that as al-Ghazālī defends a form of divine command theory, focusing on what he suggests in his work on divine names might be misleading about his general position on divine goodness. This concern would be legitimate if I aimed to defend an al-Ghazālīan perspective. However, I am aiming neither to defend his position on divine goodness nor to examine whether his position is consistent or not. That being said, I will refer to his main theological work, *al-Iqtiṣād fī al-I'tiqād* (*Moderation in Belief*), where I briefly discuss the Ash'arite perspective on divine goodness in section 3. I should also add that while I will be relying on al-Ghazālī's works in examining the Ash'arite perspective, because his works represent a mature form of the doctrines of the school, the secondary sources I will refer to will provide more information about other major representatives of the school.

external circumstances" (Morris 1991, 35). We can follow a common-sensical and intuitive method to decide which properties are great-making. For instance, we can intuitively judge that a conscious being is greater than a non-conscious being (for, being conscious is valued higher than being non-conscious); a being who has knowledge seems to be better than someone who does not have it. So, having consciousness and knowledge are great-making properties. Again, being powerful seems to be better than being powerless; and being free is better than being unfree when we think of them independently of other conditions. Similarly, a being whose non-existence is impossible is considered to be greater than a being which bears the possibility of non-existence. It seems that both modal and moral intuitions are at work in determining what great-making properties are (Morris 1991, 38-41; Rogers 2000, 12-13). As Anselm nicely puts it:

> Now [some things are such that] it is in every respect better to be _____ than not-_____, for example, wise than not-wise: It is better to be wise than not-wise. For although a just person who is not wise seems to be better than a wise person who is not just, it is not better in an unqualified sense to be not-wise than to be wise. Indeed, whatever is not-wise in an unqualified sense, insofar as it is not-wise, is less than what is wise, since everything that is not-wise would be better if it were wise. Similarly, it is in every respect better to be true than not, that is, than not-true, and just than not-just, and living than not-living. (Anselm 2007, 22)

Therefore, we can attribute to the perfect being all properties such as eternity, necessity, benevolence, power, knowledge, freedom which are absolutely better to have rather than not. However, after coming to an agreement on what great-making properties are, there are two challenging tasks to be fulfilled by theists: to show, firstly, the coherence of each great-making property in itself, and secondly, with each other; that is, to show that those properties are internally coherent and mutually consistent. This point brings us to the idea of compossibility of divine attributes which has been one of the main concerns among theists for centuries. The idea of coherency and compossibility of divine attributes will be of profound significance for my main argument regarding perfect goodness. Although this idea is not an invention of contemporary philosophers of religion,[7] it

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[7] William Mann (1975, 151) thinks that compossibility of divine attributes and hence coherence of the concept of God was of concern to only a few philosophers, such as Leibniz. Classical/traditional philosophers rather devoted their efforts to demonstrate the existence of God. Although it might be

has been highlighted strongly in recent discussions to understand the nature and scope of divine attributes,[8] and various formulations to capture this idea of compossibility have been offered. Because I find Hill's formulation clear and efficient, and I don't aim at discussing which formulation is more successful, I will work with his schema to make my point. Focusing on his formulation will also leave us more space for my main discussion.

We can now move on to his schema. Hill makes certain distinctions among the great-making properties to clarify their relationship with each other. Accordingly, some great-making properties are scaling or degreed. To say that a great-making property is scaling requires that there be two distinct beings who can exemplify the same property in varying degrees, and one of them can have the property of F more in degree than the other. Or, the same being can have a property in varying degrees. In Hill's words: "with each scaling property, *F*, is associated a relation, which will be expressed by a locution of the form '*possesses more of F than*'" (Hill 2005, 10). For instance, being powerful and wise can be named within the scaling great-making properties in that a being can have more or less of power and wisdom. The more a being has of these properties, the greater it becomes in itself and compared to other beings that have less of these properties (Hill 2005, 10).

Some properties, however, are not scaling. Properties of this kind cannot be subject to the relation of "possess[ing] more F than" and moreover a being cannot exemplify them in a graded manner. For instance, it is not possible to say that A is a more concrete object than B, given that a being is either concrete or not, and cannot have more or less of concreteness. Therefore, the property of being concrete is not scaling (Hill 2005, 10).

We can make further distinctions among scaling properties. Some scaling properties may be possessed at maximal degree. Hill describes a maximal-scaling property as follows: "Where *F* is a scaling property, a being has *F* maximally if and only if it is not possible that there be a being that has more *F*" (Hill 2005, 10-11). Thus, the property F cannot be exemplified in a greater degree by X, and no one else can have more F than X, and this is the maximal degree of a property which can be exemplified. Hill calls such a property '*a maximality property*' (Hill 2005, 11). But some properties

such as having numerical magnitude cannot be exemplified in a maximal degree since one can always think of having a higher numerical magnitude. This kind of property is called '*a non-maximality property*' (Hill 2005, 11). Some scaling great-making properties, however, may be possessed at an *optimal* degree. "If *F* is a scaling great-making property, a being, *x*, has *F* *optimally* if and only if nothing could be greater than *x* in virtue of having more or less *F*" (Hill 2005, 11). Having more or less of F than its optimal degree, precludes its exemplification as a great-making property. Many optimality properties are also maximal, or vice versa. These kinds of properties can be exemplified optimally provided that they are maximal. To put it another way, the optimal degree of such properties is also their maximal degree. We may call them "maxi-optimality properties" (Hill 2005, 11). Knowing can be considered as a maxi-optimality property. That is, its optimality is its maximality and its maximality is its optimality.

On the other hand, some great-making properties are not maxi-optimality properties although one can conceive of maximal and optimal degrees of those properties separately. Hill gives the property of lenience as an example of this group. We can imagine an infinitely lenient person, so it is a maximality property when taken on its own. The maximal degree of lenience, however, is not optimal. For, the exemplification of lenience in maximal degree might not imply sufficient justice and might preclude the exemplification of justice in optimal or maximal degree. In this case, we can consider a too lenient being and say that it is better to be lenient than not to be; and again, to be more lenient up to a certain degree (to the extent that it does not require to make a concession on justice) is better than being less lenient. So, even if lenience is both a maximality property and optimality property, it is not a maxi-optimality property. Since their maximal and optimal degrees are different, Hill calls properties of this kind "duality properties" (Hill 2005, 11). Thus, we can conclude that there should be a compatibility and balance between great-making properties in terms of maximality and optimality.

I will now apply Hill's schema to the notion of justice to show how its harmony with other moral attributes generates the idea of perfect goodness. Let me begin with defining justice drawing on al-Ghazālī's definition and pointing out its general and particular meanings. Al-Ghazālī defines justice by linking it to God's actions. Accordingly, God's justice consists of the regularity and harmony in his actions. In its most general sense, justice is to put everything in its proper place and to do everything in the most fitting way as it should be. In this regard, justice indicates the perfect order and harmony of creation in every part of the universe, and that God has placed each thing in the rank suitable to it. One can see the harmony and the

regularity of God's actions by observing whatever God has created, from the heavens to the tiniest part of the universe (al-Ghazālī 2007, 92-96).[9] The perfect harmony in creation manifests God's cosmic justice.

This general meaning of justice implies the particular meaning of it according to which God is just in his moral actions. As indicated above, the particular meaning of justice has two significant implications on God's moral actions. Firstly, justice excludes acting unjustly or in a morally wrong manner towards any being. Secondly, it implies morally harmonious action which in turn might require the prioritization of one moral attribute over the other. The general meaning of justice implies the particular one because acting unjustly in terms of the particular meaning amounts to acting disproportionately and inappropriately. This second sense of justice manifests the moral harmony of God's actions. Now, I will concentrate on the second aspect of justice implied by the first one and seek to show how justice dominates the idea of goodness by appealing to some thought experiments in terms of maximality-optimality balance among God's moral properties.

**Case 1**: Let me first begin with justice and mercy. Suppose there is an eight-year-old girl who suffered from sexual abuse of an adult male X. It is pretty clear that due to this violation, which is an assault against her body as well as soul, the little girl will suffer terribly. Again, suppose X was arrested and faced a trial for this crime. Let the judge be an infinitely merciful person. He wishes that everybody would be good towards each other and conceives a person's evil deed as an evil act against himself or herself. Accordingly, the judge thinks that X deprived himself of goodness by committing evil by his abuse and that he is likely to lose his chance to live an honorable life. For this reason, the judge has mercy on the violator and decides not to punish him. Indeed, the judge has the same amount of mercy on the little girl, too. He wishes the little girl could do away with the ill effects of this violation and decides to help her throughout her life. Of course, we may have mercy on people who commit such crimes due to similar reasons to those of the judge. But if our mercy were maximal, that would lead to an injustice, namely, to the detriment of the little girl. For in

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[9] Al-Ghazālī (2007) elaborates on his account by giving examples from particular to a more general creation of God, such as the harmony and regularity of the human body and the creation of heaven and earths to show how despite seemingly imperfect details, the whole creation manifests a perfect balance and harmony (93-96). He refers to some relevant verses of *the Qur'ān*, too, such as chapter 67 (Surah al-Mulk), verses 3-4: "(…) Who created the seven heavens, one above the other. You will not see any flaw in what the Lord of Mercy creates. Look again! Can you see any flaw? Look again! And again! Your sight will turn back to you, weak and defeated" *The Qur'ān* (2005). All further citations from *the Qur'ān* are from this translation. For all references to *The Qur'ān*, the first number refers to the order of the chapters and is followed by the verse numbers.

this case, the violator will not pay for his crime and this remission of punishment may even promote his evil deed. It is even unclear that having mercy on someone in terms of ignoring his/her crime is a real mercy as it may preclude the criminal from becoming aware of his evil action and taking responsibility for his doings. So, it seems quite clear that he should be punished for the prevention of the recurrence of such crimes. We neither regard this decree of forgiveness as a just one; nor do we think that the judge is good enough.

**Case 2**: Consider the relationship between justice and generosity or justice and love. Assume that a very wealthy and maximally generous dad gives a great deal of money to his son who is an arms dealer. The dad knows that his son uses this money for illegal affairs, and this produces undeserved gain and brings enormous and irreversible damage to innocent people. Although the dad does not approve of his son's actions, because of his infinite love for his son and his great generosity, he supports him financially. Since benevolence or generosity is a maximality property, the dad can contribute to his son financially as much as possible. Nevertheless, none of us would think that he is a good dad, that he treats him fairly or that he is doing a favor for his son or humanity. Contrarily, the dad was supposed to take his son's character into account and stop the financial support, regardless of his overwhelming love for his son.

**Case 3**: Indeed, in some cases even if there is no action that can be labeled as "morally wrong", justice in the sense of acting harmoniously and appropriately requires the priority of being benevolent and forgiving over demanding what is your right to ask. Suppose that A has to repay a loan to B, but that A also faces some financial difficulties. B is not in an urgent need of money. A asks for the extension of the payment periods. Although B doesn't need the money in the near future and is perfectly able to postpone the repayment, he doesn't grant the extension just because he wants the money back in time. Obviously, in this case A can't claim that B did wrong to him given that he promised to repay the loan on time.[10] However, many of us would think that B didn't act graciously and hence appropriately in a moral sense. In that case, B would neither be maximally nor optimally just. For, justice requires maxi-optimal appropriateness in moral actions. Hence B was supposed to accept postponing repayment to be maxi-optimally just.

These examples aim to show that if justice is not exemplified in maximal-optimal degree, the properties which can be seen as great-making on their

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[10] I borrow this example from Eleonore Stump (1992, 480).

own cannot be morally good. And some properties should be exemplified optimally so that justice is exemplified maxi-optimally. Certainly, there might be some situations in which maxi-optimality justice and maximal mercy and maximal generosity are compatible. For instance, a judge may not punish a thief provided that the thief recompenses the loss, and the aggrieved person forgives him. Again, according to the Islamic tradition, Muslims have responsibilities both to themselves, their communities, and to their Creator. God may forgive a person who neglects his duty of, say, worship towards himself. Or God may reward exceedingly a good deed of his creature more than this deed deserves (*The Qur'ān*, 6:160). In such cases maximal mercy and generosity are compatible with maxi-optimal justice. For no wrong is done to anyone. But if a person does evil to any other creature, no matter human or animal, compensation of this evil becomes a requirement of justice, unless the one who was wronged forgives the wrongdoer or there is any other factor that mitigates the wrong action. But this compensation cannot be more than it deserves even in the least degree (*The Qur'ān*, 28:84). Thus, God's attributes reflect such a harmony and balance in terms of maximality-optimality, and justice warrants this balance.

One might argue that the scenarios in question are not proper examples of maxi-optimal exemplification of justice. It might be said that by adding some details to the scenarios, we can disprove the applicability of these examples to God's actions and find out that it wouldn't be just for God to act in the way described in the examples. I think this might be the case. However, I should note that the examples in question are not purported to exhaust all possibilities regarding the cases. For those who are not satisfied with the examples, we can offer a general principle such as, "For every x, if x is an unjust action in its objective and proper sense, God would not do that action in any possible scenario". I think this principle can accommodate more articulated and well-thought examples. It is also worth noting that the examples above are neutral about the modality of God's acting justly. That is to say, they do not tell us anything about the nature of the conformity between God's action and moral principles. The question of whether God does act justly out of necessity, or He does so freely remain unaddressed, and I think the proponents of both sides can agree on the concept of perfect goodness I suggest.

Another concern about the view I suggest might be that it doesn't satisfy the common theistic intuition about God's attributes, as it seems to maintain that at least some of God's attributes are limited in degree. It is widely accepted among theists that God's attributes are infinite, and unsurpassable in *quality* and *degree*. Instead of renouncing this

commonsense belief, we can preserve the maximality view for all attributes of God simply by defining each property properly. Take the cases of the overly merciful judge and overly generous father. In both cases, we can question whether the judge and the father are really merciful and generous. Both have a superficial understanding or misconception of being merciful, supportive, and generous. If the father were a truly supporting and loving one, he would want his son to flourish and stop financing and enabling his son's actions. Again, the judge, had he been truly merciful, was supposed to punish the violator, allowing him an opportunity to rehabilitate and live a virtuous life by taking responsibility for his deeds. In fact, in both cases, the actions required by real or actual mercy, generosity, or love are contrary to what they did. So, if we define these properties accurately, we can definitely say that God has all his attributes maximally in quality and degree as the maximal degree of a property that can be possessed by anyone can't be maintained by making concessions on the very requirements of the proper meanings of those attributes. Thus, the degree of mercy that God can possess without violating the proper meaning of mercy (or benevolence, or any other attribute) is the maximal degree that can be possessed by any possible being.[11]

To this objection, I have two brief comments. My primary aim in this paper is "not" to discuss how we should name the distinctions among God's properties regarding quality and degree, or under which circumstances a divine attribute can be called "maximal". Rather, I intend to show that no matter how we name divine attributes, namely maximal/optimal/omni properties, there must be a balance and compatibility among them, and justice is a key concept or attribute in understanding this balance. Therefore, yes, if we define the maximal degree of a property as: the highest degree which can be possessed by a divine being without any inconsistency with other divine attributes, and hence if the highest degree of compossible attributes is their maximal degree, we can absolutely say that all divine attributes are maximal in degree as well as in quality. I think the primary concern should be to preserve the intuition about the compossibility and compatibility of divine attributes and to appreciate how justice plays a crucial role in this balance.

However, although a different naming wouldn't make a substantial difference in my main argument, the distinction I use here seems to have a considerable benefit. It helps us capture the difference between God's natural properties, so to speak—such as omniscience, omnipotence, omnipresence, necessity, etc.—and his moral properties—such as mercy,

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[11] I would like to thank Derek Estes for bringing up this point.

forgiveness, or justice—which are closely related to his will. We can't conceive of any natural attribute of God at a lesser degree; they must be maximal with logical or natural necessity. But since God "exercises" his moral attributes "voluntarily", we have a different kind of necessity here (Clarke 1998, 49). Again, since they are subject to his will, it is not impossible here to conceive of them at a lesser or greater degree. So, it doesn't seem to be precise to call them maximal in the same sense. And for the sake of clarity and precision, it seems better to call the highest degree of moral attributes "optimal". This distinction seems quite suitable in showing how a divine attributes schema which does not involve justice would fall short of reflecting the idea of goodness and could not have been complete or perfect. This does not imply that the divine attributes are limited, and I think it is perfectly compatible with the unsurpassability of divine attributes both in quality and degree. For, no one can surpass God in having these properties neither in quality nor in degree and God cannot have these properties at a greater degree without violating justice without which goodness can't be perfect. But when we think of these attributes just in themselves, independently of each other, nothing precludes us from increasing the requirements of each property which are inconsistent with each other.

Again, one can dispute the distinction I employ by saying that it implies lack of *intrinsic maximum* of divine properties, and this might raise doubts about the coherence of the concept of God. That is, since each moral attribute of God can be considered not to have an upper limit, there will exist a higher one for every possible degree—no matter how high it is— that God has his moral properties. Therefore, He cannot be that than which nothing greater can be conceived (Mann 1975, 151-152). [12] Such an objection can be met in two ways. First, we can say that the intrinsic maximum of each property is the degree at which it is coherently compossible with other moral attributes. Hence, although each attribute can be infinitely maximal when isolated from other attributes, the compossible form of each attribute has an intrinsic maximum. Second, even if each moral attribute doesn't have an intrinsic maximum when taken in itself, the concept of perfect goodness which is predicated on other moral attributes can have an intrinsic maximum. In that case, the intrinsic maximum of perfect goodness would be coherently compossible and the most harmonious degree of all other moral attributes. What is essential in

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[12] The original objection belongs to C. D. Broad (1953, 179-180). Mann (1975) successfully shows that given God's attributes have infinitely many degrees, it doesn't follow that those attributes do not have an intrinsic maximum. However, in footnote 3, he implies that a distinction similar to what I employed would face Broad's objection.

terms of perfect goodness is the integrity and harmony of all moral attributes in which justice functions as a key property.

I do not intend to analyze the concept of justice with its all implications in this paper, yet the examples above aim to show that perfect goodness supervenes on God's other moral attributes. A being may have moral goodness on the condition that he/she is just, and an idea of goodness which does not involve justice cannot be perfect. Any moral property which prevents the exemplification of justice in the maxi-optimal degree loses the characteristic of being good. Any property that makes someone equidistant to both good and evil diminishes his/her justice dramatically; we can hardly have respect for such a being. As Thomas Reid rightly stated, an idea of goodness which is not based on a love for truth or virtue and a hate for evil and which is just understood as producing more happiness is far from being a sufficient condition for moral perfection either for God or for human beings. Justice is the very representation of these motivations (Reid 1981, 98-100).

To sum up, on the one hand, justice signifies the just actions of God which consist of harmony and fitness as well as fairness to all creatures; on the other hand, it reveals the balance and compatibility of God's moral attributes. This harmony of God's moral attributes constitutes his perfect moral goodness.


## 3.    Perfect Goodness in Islam

How can our analysis, in which justice has a pivotal role, assist us in understanding the concept of perfect goodness in Islam? In the remainder of this paper, I'll briefly illustrate how the attributes that are predicated of God in *the Qur'ān* and particular discussions regarding divine names and attributes in the Islamic tradition support the concept of perfect goodness I outlined above.

First of all, all the divine names and attributes that are predicated of God in *the Qur'ān* highlight the balance and harmony between his properties by way of which his goodness is revealed. It is true that it is stated *in the Qur'ān* that both good and evil come from God (4:78), and that He creates evil (113:2), as well as whatever exists other than himself (2:29; 6:73, 102;13;16; 32:7; 35:1; 39:62; 59:24; 64:2), highlighting that God is the

absolute creator, the ultimate and first cause of all that exists. Verse 4:78[13] mentions some people who believed that all blessings they receive come from God, whereas all their misfortunes or afflictions were due to the prophet's presence among them. In response, it is reiterated that not only health, ease, and prosperity but also diseases, poverty, and other hardships are created and granted by God. Hence, nothing can be independent of God and can escape from his control and will (al-Ṭabarī 2001, 7:240-241; Al-Māturīdī 2005, 3:267; Al-Rāzī 1981, 4:193-197; Elmalılı 2021, 2:374). In 113:1-2, God teaches Muslims in a form of prayer that they should seek refuge with God against the harm/evil in what he has created.[14] And the harm or evil in what he has created can be widely considered as natural evils such as diseases, natural disasters, malefic animals, as well as the evil actions of human beings (Al-Rāzī 1981, 32:192; al-Zamakhsharī 2017, 6:1469).[15] Yet, the Islamic tradition broadly agrees that those evils are

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[13] After highlighting God's sovereignty over everything that exists and reminding people that neither good nor evil events are outside God's control in 4:78, the next verse (4:79) warns us not to misconstrue the previous verse by stating that whatever good happens to man is from God and whatever evil happens to them is from themselves. Those verses have been widely interpreted as emphasizing both God's control over whatever exists/happens, as well as free choice and hence the responsibility of human beings for their actions. There are many other verses that emphasize the responsibility of human beings both in committing evils and evils/afflictions that happened to them because of their evil actions (3:165; 7:23; 23:62; 41:46; 42:30; 45:15). Ibn Taymiyya is one of the scholars who highlights the causal connection between human sins and evils that they commit/experience where he attempts to clarify what appears to be a contradiction between verses 4:78-79. For the summary of his comments on these verses from his different works, see Hoover (2007, 196-198).

[14] This verse (*min sharri mā khalaqa*) can be read in two related senses, namely, 1) From the evil that He has created, and 2) From the evil *of* what He has created. Al-Māturīdī mentions both readings and favors the first one on linguistic grounds. However, he states that this should be understood only in terms of his being the creator of whatever comes to existence, which encompasses the evil actions of agents and non-agential evils. However, al-Māturīdī also insists that creating evil doesn't entail that He commits evil as the Mu'tazilīs claim. That is, although whatever exists falls under the category of his creation, neither He nor his actions can be characterized as evil. That would be the case if God had created evil in vain, with no wisdom (al-Māturīdī 2005, 10:655). He makes a similar point in (2005, 3:267) where he explains 4:79 by saying that it is improper and disrespectful to call God as the creator of evil things, as He is not creating those evil in vain or without a good purpose. Ibn Taymiyya regards this verse one of the three indirect manners in which evil can be attributed to God. The first type of attribution is by way of generality. Because there are many verses that repeatedly highlight that God is creator of everything, whatever exists should be considered in the scope of God's creation in general. The second type of attribution is attributing evil to God by way of its secondary cause, as it is the case in 113:2. And the last one is by way of omitting the agent who wills evil, and he refers to 72:10 as an example of this type of attribution. It is noteworthy that all attribution types are indirect, which shows, according to Ibn Taymiyya, that evil is not created as evil (absolute or pure) by God; contrariwise, this indirect attribution indicates the wise purpose of God in creating evil which makes it ultimately good. See Hoover (2007, 179-181, 190-195).

[15] Although the Muslim tradition was on the same page in including morally bad actions of human beings under the category of evil, major theology schools were divided into two main camps on whether free human actions were also created by God. The Mu'tazilīs were the sole group that gave complete autonomy to human beings in causing/creating their morally good or bad actions. For the Mu'tazilīs, attributing the creation of evil/good deeds of human beings to God would destroy their freedom/responsibility and would undermine any sound sense of praise and blame (and hence divine

created by God to test human beings, and that this world is considered a trial for humans, or they are partial and relative evils that are necessary components of the perfectly ordered universe. Hence all evils have a place in God's wise providential plan (Al-Māturīdī 2005, 3:265-268; al-Zamakhsharī 2017, 2:197).[16] Although God is the creator of evil, too, as a natural consequence of God's being the ultimate cause of whatever exists, as far as I know, no one or no school of theology in the Islamic tradition interpreted those verses as God's causing evil for the sake of evil itself or with the intention of doing evil unto creatures. On the contrary, some prominent exegetes warn us that even though nothing can exist or no state of affairs can actually be independent of his ultimate will and control, it would be a costly mistake to label God's actions as "evil". God is far from having any motivation that would lead him to doing evil, and hence even conceiving him doing evil is disrespectful (Al-Māturīdī 2005, 3:184-185, 265-268; Elmalılı 2021, 2:375-376; see also Winter 2017, 241).

Some remarks regarding these verses are due before we move on to the names attributed to God in *the Qur'ān*. God's being the ultimate cause and creator of whatever exists, and hence ultimate dependence to his will, is a principle that is commonly assumed in classical theism. However, theists have put in a great deal of effort to articulate what this general principle does and doesn't entail. They have developed many theories to show that although the general principle entails that it is God who ultimately wills to cause evil states of affairs, it doesn't follow that He does evil or what He does can be considered as evil. One way of showing this is to make a distinction between God's ultimate will to which every single thing or state of affairs owes its existence and actuality, and his initial will that reflects what would please him.[17] That explains why theists are usually inclined to

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reward and punishment). However, the Ash'arites, the Māturīdīs and the Traditionalists agreed in general that God is the sole creator of everything that exists and hence all actions of human beings are also created by God. They offered varied theories to warrant human freedom and moral responsibility mainly by claiming that those actions belong to humans in terms of choice and to God in terms of being created/caused by him. For a detailed discussion of the position of major theology schools on this topic, see Jackson (2009).

[16] However, one can track the impact of theological identities in the way Muslim scholars gloss those verses. That is, although they widely agree that the existence of evil is part of God's providential plan, the points they highlight in their explanations reflect their different theological tendencies. For instance, in glossing 4:78-79 and 133:2, as a Mu'tazilī, al-Zamakhsharī passes over whether it is God who creates evil and emphasizes the wisdom behind the existence of evil. Conversely, it is not difficult to see the motivation to oppose the Mu'tazilite theodicy and the doctrine that human beings are the creator of their actions in al-Rāzī's explanations. He emphasizes God being the sole creator, and that evil is also his creation whereas he doesn't broach the issue of wisdom. For a work that focuses on al-Rāzī's position see (Faruque 2017). In Al-Māturīdī and Ibn Taymiyya, however, one can observe the emphasis on both points.

[17] In this regard, it was a common practice to differentiate between God's antecedent and consequent/permissive will (Aquinas 1947, I.19.6; Leibniz 2007, 140).

interpret God's willing the evil to come to existence as *permitting* it to happen for wise/providential reasons without approbation.

Similarly, affirming that God's creative activity involves his creating human actions too, doesn't by itself render the Islamic tradition more liable to the challenges regarding the problem of evil given that regardless of what kind of role they give to the secondary causation in their causal framework, all theists face the problem of evil in one way or another. Moreover, even the Ash'arite tradition, which strongly highlights that human actions are created by God, has members who make a distinction between God's ontological and deontological decrees, implying that whatever God causes or creates is not in the scope of his normative preferences (Jackson 2009, 86-90, fn. 55). One more time, God's creating evil is understood in the most general sense that He is the ultimate cause of everything, and each group within the Islamic tradition sought to justify God's creating evil in their theodicy in accordance with some other metaphysical and epistemological principles they assumed.[18] Therefore, we can safely say that in *the Qur'ān*, including in the aforementioned verses, no evil for evil's sake is attributed to God.

On the contrary, *the Qur'ān* strongly urges us to think that God is completely far from any kind of ontological or moral imperfection (59:23, 62:1). God attributes to himself the names of *al-Salām* (The Sound or Flawless) and *al-Quddūs* (The Holy) in the same verse (59:23). Both names have negative and affirmative aspects in the sense that they deny any kind of imperfection in God and ascribe all the perfections to him. Accordingly, *al-Salām* is the one whose essence is free from any imperfection, his attributes from any deficiency, and his actions from any evil. It implies that no evil is willed for the sake of evil by God. This name also signifies that He is the source of well-being and peace (al-Ghazālī 2007, 61-62).[19] In addition to this meaning, *al-Quddūs* puts God above all the attributes of perfection as He transcends all the perfection we can perceive of (al-Ghazālī 2007, 59-61).[20]

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[18] For various attempts from Islamic intellectual tradition to reconcile the existence of evil with the existence of a perfectly good God, see Chowdhury (2021).

[19] See also the explanation of the names *al-Mu'min* (al-Ghazālī 2007, 62-64) and *al-Muhaymin* (al-Ghazālī 2007, 64-65). For the references in *The Qur'ān*, see 59:23, 6:82, 24:55.

[20] As my primary concern is not to focus on the general/ontological goodness of God, I will not give at length the verses that hint at God's ontological perfection. For those who are interested in, some of them can be listed as follows: *al-Ḥaq*—the Truth/the Real One—(al-Ghazālī 2007, 124-126; *The Qur'ān*, 18:44, 22:6, 24:25, 31:30), *al-Ḥayy*—the Living—(al-Ghazālī 2007, 129; *The Qur'ān*, 3:2, 40:65, 25:58), *al-Qayyūm*—the Self Existing—(al-Ghazālī 2007,129-130; *The Qur'ān*, 2:255, 3:2), *al-Wāḥid*—the Unique/One—(al-Ghazālī 2007, 130-13; *The Qur'ān*, 112:1, 90:5, 90:7) *al-Ṣamad*—the

So, which moral attributes does *the Qur'ān* ascribe to God to lay out his perfect goodness? To start with, the strongest impression that *the Qur'ān* forms on its reader is how merciful, compassionate, and graceful God is towards his creatures. Every single chapter of *the Qur'ān*—except the ninth—starts with the invocation "In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate". In addition to the invocation, the name/attribute of *al-Rāḥmān*—the Merciful—is ascribed to God fifty-seven times, whereas He is described as *al-Raḥīm*—the Compassionate—one hundred and fourteen times (Topaloğlu 2007). According to *the Qur'ān*, God is the most merciful of those who show mercy (12:64, 21:83) and also the best of the merciful (23:118). Al-Ghazālī (2007) describes the perfect form of mercy as follows:

> Perfect mercy is pouring out benefaction to those in need, and directing it to them, for their care; and inclusive mercy is when it embraces deserving and undeserving alike. The mercy of God—great and glorious—is both perfect and inclusive [*tāmma wa-'āmma*]: perfect inasmuch as it wants to fulfill the needs of those in need and does meet them; and inclusive inasmuch as it embraces both deserving and undeserving, encompassing this world and the next, and includes bare necessities and needs and special gifts over and above them (54).[21]

Whatever exists is in need of God's mercy and He fulfills all those needs. Where human beings are concerned, his mercy unfolds in four phases: firstly, in his creating man; secondly, in his guiding them to faith and to the means of happiness by furnishing the world with signs that will lead to knowledge about himself and sending them messengers to call them to the truth; thirdly, making them happy in the next life; and lastly, by granting them contemplation of his gracious face (al-Ghazālī 2007, 54).

Many other names and attributes of God, in fact, signify his benevolence towards his creatures by reminding us of the countless gifts He bestows upon us. For instance, *al-Barr*,—the Doer of Good—means that He is the absolute doer of good. And "the absolute doer of good is the one from whom every good deed and beneficence comes" (al-Ghazālī 2007, 137; *The Qur'ān* 52:28). Unlike his creatures, God's beneficence to his

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Eternal—(al-Ghazālī 2007, 131; *The Qur'ān*, 112:2), *al-Awwal, al-Ākhir*—the First, the Last—(al-Ghazālī 2007,133-134; *The Qur'ān*, 57:3), *al-Ghanī, al-Mughnī*—the Rich, the Enricher—(al-Ghazālī 2007, 143; *The Qur'ān*, 10:68, 47:38), *al-Nūr*—Light—(al-Ghazālī 2007, 145; *The Qur'ān*, 24:35, 9:32, 61:8), *al-Bāqī*—the Everlasting—(al-Ghazālī 2007, 146-147; *The Qur'ān*, 20:73, 28:88, 55:27).
[21] As this attribute/name involves possessing all the good and bestowing it upon his creatures without any compensation, Burell and Daher translate it as "The Infinitely Good" (al-Ghazālī 2007, 52).

creatures is infinite and interest-free. There is no goodness that doesn't originate from God (al-Ghazālī 2007, 137). In the sense that his giving is free from recompense and interest, He is *al-Wahhāb*—the Bestower—(al-Ghazālī 2007, 74; *The Qur'ān* 3:8). Again, given that He is the only one who owns everything, hence needs nothing from anyone else, but still loves giving, and does so although no one can claim any right to receive what God gives to them, He is *al-Karīm*—the Generous—in its most proper sense (al-Ghazālī 2007, 113-114; *The Qur'ān* 27:40, 82:6). As He desires good for all human beings, does good for them, and praises them for their good deeds, He is called *al-Wadūd*,—the loving-kind—(al-Ghazālī 2007, 118-119; *The Qur'ān* 11:90, 85:14). Moreover, God does all beneficent and kind actions so subtly and in a refined way that no one can possibly reach such a level of subtlety. Because his goodness combines gentleness and kindness in action and delicacy in perception, He is called *al-Laṭīf*—The Subtle One/the Benevolent (al-Ghazālī 2007, 96-97; *The Qur'ān* 67:13-14, 22:63; 42:19). No one except God can know the subtle and best ways of doing good to every single creature. His subtlety and kindness in doing good to his creatures can be seen in

> (…) His creating the foetus in the womb of its mother, in a threefold darkness, and his protecting and nurturing it through the umbilicus until it separates and becomes independent by taking food through its mouth; and then His inspiring it upon separation to take the breast and suckle it, even in the darkness of night, without any instruction or vision. (al-Ghazālī 2007, 96-98)

Again, it is from the subtlety and kindness of his actions that He provides the means of sustenance for life both for bodies (*al-Razzāq*—the Provider or Sustainer) (al-Ghazālī 2007, 78-79; *The Qur'ān* 5:114, 22:58, 23:72, 62:11)[22] and hearts (*al-Muqīt*—the Nourisher) (al-Ghazālī 2007, 109), inwardly and outwardly.

I think all these attributes and names ascribed to God in *the Qur'ān* suffice to dismiss the claim that the Islamic concept of God does not involve omnibenevolence. On the contrary, we can safely assume that those names and attributes fulfill the content of omnibenevolence to a great extent. Yet, *the Qur'ān* doesn't frame the concept of perfect goodness solely with the names we listed above. In addition to those names or attributes, it reminds

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[22] Indeed, in 5:114 it is stated that He is the best of providers.

us that God is also perfectly just in his actions in both aforementioned senses.[23] Firstly, injustice or being unjust is strongly disassociated from God in several verses. God never does any injustice to anyone (*The Qur'ān*, 3:25, 8:51, 9:70, 16:33, 18:49, 21:47, 23:62, 29:40, 50:29); they only receive what they did/gained with their own hands (*The Qur'ān*, 3:182, 4:49, 22:10, 26:208-209, 36:54). When the case is in favor of his servants, God doesn't treat them in accordance with what they deserve, but rewards exceedingly their every single good deed and intention (*The Qur'ān*, 4:40; 6:160). If his justice requires him to punish them, this punishment can only be the equivalent to the crime (*The Qur'ān*, 4:49, 6:10, 18:49, 28:84, 41:46; 45:22). Because God loves forgiving and He is the most absolving,[24] whenever forgiving doesn't preclude maxi-optimal exemplification of justice, He forgives his creatures. He commands to his creatures to be just (*The Qur'ān*, 4:58, 4:135, 5:8, 5:42, 16:76, 16:90, 57:25, 60:8); yet He frequently reminds them that to be forgiving is better than asking for the rights (*The Qur'ān*, 2:178, 2:237, 3:134, 3:159, 5:13, 7:199, 42:37) and that He promotes forgiveness among his servants by promising to reward those servants who forgive evil deeds or injustice committed towards them (*The Qur'ān*, 42:40, 42:43). Because justice is involved in the concept of perfect goodness as balancing and harmonizing, we can make better sense of why God sometimes punishes his servants, takes revenge on those who insist on doing evil on purpose,[25] and tests people through hardship. All of these falls within the scope of his justice and hence they are part of his overall goodness. His actions reflect the perfect balance and harmony of his moral attributes, i.e. his perfect goodness. Thus, there are a variety of divine names and attributes in *the*

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[23] *The Qur'ān* doesn't attribute justice to God in the form of noun or adjective, *al-'Adl*, the Just. However, this name or attribute is derived from many verses of *the Qur'ān* which describe God's acting perfectly just in both senses mentioned above. For some examples see (*The Qur'ān*, 3:18, 10:4, 21:47). Again, in 7:87 God is described as "*khayr al-ḥakimīn*"—the Best of the judges—and in 95:8 *aḥkam al-ḥakimīn*—*the Justest of the judges*.

[24] There are several names/attributes that stress his forgiveness, such as *al-Ghaffār*—He who is full of forgiveness—see al-Ghazālī (2007, 73-74), *The Qur'ān* (20:82, 38:66, 39:5, 40:42), *al-Ghafūr*—*the all Forgiving* (which is attributed to God in ninety-one verses of the Qur'ān) (al-Ghazālī 2007, 100-101; *The Qur'ān*, 2:182, 2:192, 2:225, 2:268, 3:31, 3:89, 3:155, 39:53), *al-Tawwāb*—the Ever-Relenting (al-Ghazālī 2007, 137-138; *The Qur'ān*, 4:16,4:64, 110:3), *al-'Afū*—the Effacer of sins (al-Ghazālī 2007, 138-139; *The Qur'ān*, 4:43, 4:149, 17:60, 22:60, 58:2).

[25] See the explanation of the name *al-Muntaqim*—the Avenger—and *al-Ḍārr*—the Punisher/the Harmer(al-Ghazālī 2007, 138, 144). Ibn Taymiyya says that these names should be understood as particular names which are restricted to particular cases. And these names are always combined with general names (such as, *al-Ḍārr* and *al-Nāfi'*—the Harmer and the Profiter; *al-Mu'ṭī* and *al-Māni'*—the Giver and the Impeder; *al-Mui'zz* and *al-Mudhill*—the Honorer and the Humiliator) that imply the dominance of general names over particular ones and the restricted scope of those names (see Hoover 2007, 186-190).

*Qur'ān* that match the concept of omnibenevolence, and the emphasis on divine justice warrants God's perfect goodness.

It seems to me that the Islamic tradition mirrors *the Qur'ānic* concept of goodness accurately. This is why divine justice has been the most debated attribute in the Islamic tradition when it comes to God's moral goodness/attributes.[26] Many challenging issues such as evil and suffering in the world, God's testing of human beings, afterlife, punishment, etc. have mainly been discussed within the scope of divine justice along with divine wisdom. This strongly suggests how divine justice has been a focal point in understanding God's perfect goodness given that justice reflects perfect balance and harmony of divine moral attributes. At this point, we should notice that there has been a broad and overwhelming consensus in the Muslim tradition over ascribing justice to God. Although Muslim theologians were not in agreement on the definition and requirements of justice, mainstream schools of theology didn't hesitate to characterize God as just and his actions as the most perfect manifestation of justice. In this regard, the Mu'tazilite school strongly defended the necessity of moral truths which was based on the idea that actions have real and objective moral values in themselves. Thus, moral concepts are binding both in divine and human levels, and God, for the Mu'tazilīs, is not only perfectly just/good, but also it is a moral obligation on God to act justly. This perfect justice obligates him to create whatever is the best (*al-aṣlaḥ*) for his creatures and to recompense the suffering of every single animal or morally non-responsible being (the theory known as *'iwaḍ*).[27]

Other major theology schools, such as Ash'arism and Māturīdīsm, had their own way of establishing God's goodness while resolutely opposing the Mu'tazilī conception of divine justice/goodness, especially when understood as an obligation on God. Both schools remained committed basically to the idea that God transcends moral concepts of good and evil understood in their worldly/created context and that God's actions cannot be evaluated by these categories. The rationale behind this commitment mainly lies in their understanding of moral concepts of good and evil in teleological terms in relation to purposes/ends of the agent which in turn are rooted in their needs, desires, and other creaturely conditions. That is, our moral concepts are closely related to our biological, social, and other

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[26] Jackson (2009) points out this connection between justice and goodness when he accurately discusses the debates on divine justice in the Islamic tradition under the title of omnibenevolence.

[27] Justice was one of the five main principles of the Mu'tazilite school (Kāḍī 'Abd al-Jabbār 2013, 2: 8-491; see also Winter 2017, 236-240).

external conditions. So, for Ash'arism and Māturīdīsm, in a world whose inhabitants are constituted with different biology and emotions, or with radically different social institutions and customs, our moral judgements could have differed from what we have in this world (al-Ghazālī 2013, 157-170).[28] Based on this observation, Māturīdī tradition concluded that judging God's actions within the worldly limits of good and evil might be entirely misleading. An act of God that seems to be unjust to us might have some wise reasons/purposes that we cannot yet comprehend, or we won't completely understand in this world. Thus, they associated God's justice with his wisdom, as we cannot judge soundly whether an act of God is just or not without knowing his purposes to act that way. It is worth noting that al-Māturīdī's definition of wisdom was the same as the definition of justice. [29] Therefore, the Māturīdī tradition strived to prove God's justice/goodness on the ground of his wisdom (Jackson 2009, ch. 4; Özaykal 2017, ch. 4).[30]

The Ash'arīs rejected the thesis that actions have real and unchangeable moral values in themselves. God doesn't have any needs, desires, or purposes that provide the causal nexus to assign the values of goodness and evilness to his actions, and there is no and cannot be any moral judgement independent of God's will. So, they defended divine command theory in varying forms, maintaining that no divine action can be unjust given that God sets the standard of justice, right and wrong, or good and bad. [31] If this is the case, can the Ash'arite tradition attribute divine goodness to God plausibly or meaningfully?

There are a number of things that should be taken into consideration regarding their position on divine justice. To start with, although we don't need to share the Ash'arite intuition about the status of moral truths, we should note that it is one thing to assert that whatever God does is good and just, and still another thing to attribute injustice to him. Although their insistence on rejecting objective moral values independent of God's will mainly resides in their concern in preserving God's perfect freedom and

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[28] Al-Māturīdī highlights especially the role of the constitution of human psyche in judging certain actions as evil, such as slaughtering animals, although the reason itself doesn't judge it to be evil (Al-Māturīdī 2010, 275).

[29] Al-Māturīdī (2010) repeatedly defines wisdom as putting everything in its proper place (102, 395); and on page 193 he explicitly relates justice to wisdom by way of specifying the latter as an aspect of the former and by giving the same definition for both.

[30] For Ibn Taymiyya's similar perspective, see Hoover (2007, 220-224).

[31] For more information, see Hourani (2007).

omnipotence, this, for the Ash'arīs, was also the way that any evil or unjust action can be completely disassociated from God (Jackson 2009, 94).[32]

Furthermore, one should notice that when they asserted that God's actions cannot be evaluated within the worldly framework of goodness and evilness, the Ash'arīs targeted primarily certain meanings of those concepts which are closely related to obligation. For instance, as a corollary to regarding the concepts of good and evil in teleological terms, al-Ghazālī states that whatever brings happiness or salvation to the agent in the afterlife is good (*ḥasan*) and whatever causes misery and divine punishment is evil (*qabīḥ*), the information of which can be only gained by way of revelation (al-Ghazālī 2013, 161-162). Here, we can observe that goodness is correlated with our duties towards God, and evil is what makes its agent liable to punishment for the failure. However, God is the sole authority in his creation and there is no one above him who could hold him accountable for what He does. In that way, those concepts are related to the concept of obligation, granted that acting in a certain way is obligatory when refraining from it induces a harm (al-Ghazālī 2013, 159). Thus, we can safely say that the connotation of obligation was one of the main reasons that the Ash'arīs were so unsympathetic to applying the concept of goodness and evilness to God's actions. They strongly rejected the Mu'tazilī concept of justice due to their firm conviction that nothing can be obligatory on a perfectly free and sovereign God.

Having said that, we should also remember that for the Ash'arīs, *the Qur'ān* was the objective canon which reflects God's normative preferences. They acknowledged *the Qur'ān* to be the undisputable primary source in which God informs us about his attributes, and the nature of his actions. Whatever God states in *the Qur'ān* about himself cannot be untrue, as there can be no lie in his promises and speech, and what He says about himself cannot be understood metaphorically unless it is necessary (al-Ghazālī 2013, 180-181, 194; al-Ghazālī 2002, 85-141). As I tried to summarize above, in *the Qur'ān*, God attributes certain names and qualities to and negates some others of himself. Thus, the Ash'arīte tradition wouldn't deny that God described himself/his actions perfectly good/just in the sense we discussed in section 2. What they denied was that

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[32] This doesn't mean that they provided a completely satisfying theory or to reject that they face notoriously challenging questions regarding the nature of morality as well as God's relation to it, just as their other voluntarists fellows do, but I think it was clear that associating evil with God or his actions was improper for them. For a work focused on al-Ghazālī's position and an attempt to solve some of the challenges that it faces, see Malik (2021).

it is obligatory for him to be good and just. In other words, according to the Ash'arīte tradition "such normative descriptions are metaphysically contingent on His will, and thus it is not an obligation on Him to be that way" (Malik 2021, 558).[33] Therefore, they could maintain that God is perfectly just/good, although He doesn't have to be so. It is tempting[34] to translate it to the contemporary philosophical jargon as follows: God is perfectly good in the actual world in the sense discussed in section 2, but He is not so in all possible worlds. Then, it could be argued that the Ash'arites defended God's contingent moral perfection versus his essential moral perfection. This, however, seems to be far from arguing that God is not good/just. On the contrary, the idea that God's goodness could be perfect only if it is contingent is not peculiar to the Ash'arites (Guleserian 1985; Brown 1991; Howard-Snyder 2017). Yet, even this claim might be misleading, if not inaccurate. For, the Ash'arites assert that no matter what God does, it would be good. So, in another possible world our moral judgement could have been different if God had commanded differently from what He did. But then, what God commanded would be good and just. This brings us to the question of what ultimately grounds God's justice/goodness. Although they do not highlight God's wisdom as boldly as the Māturīdī tradition does, it seems to me that divine wisdom would be the best candidate to ground God's perfect moral goodness (as understood in section 2) for the Ash'arite tradition too (Winter 2017, 242). Therefore, a concept of perfect goodness in reference to God's wisdom and stripped of obligation-related connotations seems to be welcomed by the Ash'arite tradition.[35] These brief remarks are far from being comprehensive and conclusive. However, I think they may give us insight into the way that divine goodness was/is debated in the Islamic tradition. No doubt, each theological school understood God's goodness in accordance with their other metaphysical, ethical, or epistemological assumptions.

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[33] Hence, the Ash'arites were on the same page with the Mu'tazilīs that God is perfectly just and good so that He will compensate every undeserved suffering of his creatures, but they disagreed with the Mu'tazilīs on the modality of God's justice/goodness (see Jackson 2009, 91; Winter 2017, 237).

[34] I say "tempting" because despite the similarities, the Ash'arites' conception of modality is different from possible world semantics and hence might not lead to the same consequences when applied to certain problems. As an example, see Yazici (2021).

[35] Winter (2017) rightly maintains that this doesn't amount to God's being morally good in any *human sense*, as his acts are not shaped by the values of *obedience* and *disobedience* (242). Malik (2021) makes the same point after outlining how al-Ghazālī defines the concepts of good and evil in a moral sense (563-564). So, both argue that God's goodness cannot be understood in a moral sense from the Ash'arite perspective. I admit that those concepts are not applicable to God in an ordinary human sense in the Ash'arite context for the reasons given above. However, it doesn't mean that God's actions do not manifest moral virtues that constitute his goodness in the sense defined above. I think Al-Ghazālī (2013) also hints at this point where he says, "An act of God is good no matter what it is, although God has no needs" (162). Hence, after negating the implications of being in need and having an obligation (which are based on creaturely imperfections) of the concept of goodness, it could soundly be applied to God's actions. Therefore, we can cautiously say that the Ash'arite tradition would acknowledge God's perfect goodness in a moral sense with some reservations.

To conclude, it is a hasty conclusion to infer that God is not perfectly good in Islam due to the absence of literal attribution of omnibenevolence. There is no way that the Islamic concept of God accommodates evil, not as something that He creates or permits for widely accepted reasons among theists, but something He intends to do just for its own sake. "God is far above what they attribute to him" (*The Qur'ān*, 37:159). Contrariwise, many names attributed to God and actions that are negated of him strongly drive us to think that God has all the moral attributes constituting perfect goodness. Furthermore, the essential role of the concept of justice—as the maxi-optimal balance of God's moral perfections and as a mode which describes his relationship with his creatures—is to provide us with a sound ground to make better sense of many challenges regarding God's goodness and the existence of evil. Although the space doesn't permit us to elaborate on related questions and challenges, this conceptual framework on divine goodness gives us a glimpse of Islamic perspectives and hence paves the way for more specific discussions with a new insight.

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