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A Response to James Sterba's Problem of Evil through al-Qāḍī ʿAbd al-Jabbār's Understanding of Divine Action

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Abstract
The problem of evil remains one of the most powerful philosophical objections to the existence of God, particularly concerning divine omnipotence, omniscience, and goodness. In his 2019 work *Is a Good God Logically Possible?*, James Sterba has formulated a contemporary version of this problem by integrating principles from moral philosophy, especially the doctrine of Double Effect and the Pauline principle, into the debate. He argues that God, by failing to prevent horrendous moral evils, violates even the minimal standards of moral responsibility and thereby contradicts the notion of perfect goodness. This article offers a critical response to Sterba's argument by addressing two interrelated issues. Firstly, following Gilbert Ryle's definition, it will be argued that Sterba commits a "category mistake" by evaluating God's actions according to standards appropriate to human moral agency, as this approach overlooks the ontological and epistemological distinctions between God and humans. Secondly, it will be argued that the action theory developed by the prominent Muʿtazilite theologian, Qāḍī ʿAbd al-Jabbār, provides a far more coherent and robust framework for evaluating divine actions. Qāḍī's theory encompasses divine attributes such as omnipotence, knowledge, and will, emphasizing that these attributes operate within the framework of justice (ʿadl) and wisdom (ḥikma), principles frequently invoked in the Islamic intellectual tradition, thus avoiding an account of divine will as arbitrary. Moreover, Qāḍī's acknowledgment that human-related factors such as benefit (maṣlaḥa), grace (iḥsān), and need are taken into account in God's actions reinforces the thesis of the purposiveness of divine acts. Unlike the skeptical theism that renders God's reasons unknowable, Qāḍī asserts that divine actions are both just and comprehensible. In order to support the hypothesis developed on the basis of Qāḍī's views, this study also draws on contemporary critiques of Sterba's argument from evil. These critiques provide a substantive foundation that further reinforces Qāḍī's perspective. Ultimately, the article contends that classical Islamic theology, particularly Qāḍī's action theory, offers a philosophically robust and morally meaningful alternative to Sterba's challenge.

Keywords: Philosophy of Religion, Ḥikma, ʿAdl, Divine Action, James P. Sterba, al-Qāḍī ʿAbd al-Jabbār.

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James Sterba'nın Kötülük Problemine Kâdî Abdülcebbâr'ın İlâhî Eylem Anlayışı Üzerinden Bir Cevap

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Öz
Kötülük problemi, özellikle Tanrı'nın mutlak kudreti, bilgisi ve iyiliği bağlamında Tanrı'nın varlığına yönelik en güçlü felsefî itirazlardan biri olmaya devam etmektedir. James Sterba, 2019 tarihli *Is a Good God Logically Possible?* adlı eserinde bu problemi, ahlâk felsefesinin özellikle Çifte Etki doktrini ve Pavlus ilkesi bağlamında tartışmaya dâhil ederek çağdaş bir biçimde yeniden formüle etmiştir. Sterba, Tanrı'nın korkunç ahlâkî kötülükleri engellememek suretiyle en asgari düzeydeki ahlâkî sorumluluk ölçütlerini bile ihlal ettiğini ve bu nedenle mutlak iyilik anlayışıyla çeliştiğini savunur. Bu makale, Sterba'nın argümanına iki yönlü eleştirel bir yanıt sunmaktadır. İlk olarak, Gilbert Ryle'ın tanımladığı biçimiyle, Sterba'nın Tanrı'nın eylemlerini insanın ahlâkî fâilliğine uygun ölçütlerle değerlendirmesinin bir "kategori hatası" teşkil ettiği ileri sürülecektir. Çünkü Sterba bu yaklaşımla, Tanrı ile insan arasındaki ontolojik ve epistemolojik farklılıkları göz ardı etmektedir. İkinci olarak, önde gelen bir Mutezilî kelâmcı olan Kâdî Abdülcebbâr'ın geliştirdiği eylem teorisinin ilâhî fiillerin değerlendirilmesinde daha tutarlı bir çerçeve sunduğu savunulacaktır. Kâdî'nin teorisi, kudret, ilim ve irade gibi ilâhî sıfatları içerir ve bu sıfatların, İslâm düşünce geleneğinde sıkça başvurulan adalet (*ʿadl*) ve hikmet (*ḥikma*) ilkeleri çerçevesinde işlediğini vurgulayarak ilâhî iradeyi keyfî bir bağlamda açıklamaz. Ayrıca Kâdî'nin, Tanrı'nın eylemlerinde m*aslahat* (fayda), *lütuf* (ihsan) ve *ihtiyaç* gibi insani unsurları da dikkate aldığını ifade etmesi, ilâhî eylemlerin amaca uygunluğu tezini güçlendirir. Tanrı'nın gerekçelerini bilinemez kılan şüpheci teizmin aksine, Kâdî'ye göre ilâhî fiiller hem adil hem de kavranabilir niteliktedir. Bununla birlikte Kâdî'nin görüşleri temelinde geliştirilen hipotezi desteklemek için bu çalışma, bu çalışma, Sterba'nın kötülük argümanına yönelik çağdaş eleştirilerden de yararlanmaktadır. Bu eleştiriler, Kâdî'nin perspektifini daha da güçlendiren sağlam bir dayanak sunmaktadır. Sonuç olarak bu makale, klasik İslam kelâmının, özellikle Kâdî'nin eylem teorisinin, Sterba'nın ortaya koyduğu meydan okumaya felsefî açıdan sağlam ve ahlâkî olarak anlamlı bir alternatif sunduğunu ileri sürmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Din Felsefesi, Hikmet, Adalet, İlâhî Eylemler, James Sterba, Kâdî Abdülcebbâr.

Atıf
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Introduction

The relationship between God and humans is an important issue in the philosophy of religion, examined in its ontological, cosmological, and moral dimensions. This relationship has also been widely discussed in connection with the problem of evil, miracles, and prayer.[1] In the classical formulation of the problem of evil, the logical relationship between the existence of a theistic God and the existence of evil in the world is questioned.[2] Historically traced back to Epicurus (d. 270 BCE), the logical problem of evil was defended in the mid-20th century by John L. Mackie (d. 1981) and responded to by Alvin Plantinga's "free will defense" theory, which explains the thesis that evil is compatible with the existence of God in terms of human free will.[3] This development led to the idea that the power of the logical formulation of evil is declining and gave rise to a new version known as the evidential problem of evil. In the evidential problem, not all evils, but only some of them, are used to criticise God's existence, and it is argued that evils make God's existence less probable.[4] Thus, the evidential problem is a criticism of God's existence in terms of the amount and kinds of evil.

James Sterba, in *Is a Good God Logically Possible?*, reexamines Mackie's argument from evil through an ethical lens and constructs a new formulation of the problem that questions why a morally perfect God would permit moral evil. He supports his argument by assessing divine actions in light of ethical principles, particularly with regard to the protection of human rights. According to him, horrendous evils that violate individuals' right to life cannot be reconciled with a morally consistent conception of God; therefore, such evils must be prevented by God. He articulates this argument as follows: "(…) whether or not an all-good God who is also presumed to be all-powerful is logically possible given the degree and amount of moral evil that exists in our world."[5] Based on this statement, Sterba concludes that the failure of a God with classical theistic attributes to intervene in the horrendous evils committed against humans implies that such a God cannot exist. This reasoning reflects Sterba's commitment to a moral framework that assigns responsibility to intervene in horrendous events, even when evaluating divine actions.

However, Sterba's stance invites criticism for failing to consider the theistic understanding of God's ontological distinctiveness. By treating God and human agents as equally bound by the same moral principles, he commits a category mistake that fails to account for fundamental ontological and epistemological differences. Therefore, any critique of Sterba's argument must first clarify the nature of the relationship between God and human.[6]

In Islamic thought, in contrast to Sterba's view, there is a long-standing belief that moral norms applicable to humans cannot be imposed upon God.[7] This perspective will be examined in our study through the divine action theory of the Mu'tazilite scholar al-Qāḍī 'Abd al-Jabbār. In this context, the Islamic belief that God is not subject to the same moral obligations as humans will be evaluated in conjunction with an expanded theistic perspective that offers a broader understanding of God's moral nature.[8] Qāḍī's work, *al-Mughnī*, offers substantial insights into divine action and moral philosophy. A recent article evaluates Sterba's argument on moral evil within the framework of Qāḍī's understanding of justice and free will. That article modified Plantinga's defense of free will, which Sterba criticizes, and re-examines it through some of Qāḍī's concepts.[9] In our study, we examine Sterba's argument through Qāḍī's theory of action as well as his concepts of wisdom and justice. We further discuss the philosophical distinction between divine and human actions in order to offer a response to Sterba from the perspective of Islamic thought. In Qāḍī's teaching, God's justice means that He does not oppress and that there is a

1 Michael Peterson etc., *Reason and Religious Blief: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion* (New York – Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 158.

2 Cafer Sadık Yaran, *Kötülük ve Teodise: Batı ve İslam Din Felsefesinde Kötülük Problemi ve Teistik Çözümler* (İstanbul: Rağbet Yayınları, 2023), 40-41; David Hume, *Din Üstüne*, trans. Mete Tunçay (Ankara: Kültür Bakanlığı Yayınları, 1979), 169.

3 John L. Mackie, "Evil and Omnipotence", *Mind* 64/254 (1955), 200; Alvin Plantinga, *Tanrı, Özgürlük ve Kötülük*, çev. Musa Yanık (Ankara: Fol Kitap, 2023), 48-49; Zeki Özcan – Tuğba Çam, "Kötülük Problemi Neden İmana Engel Değildir?", *AKİD: Afyon Kocatepe Üniversitesi İslami İlimler Fakültesi Dergisi* 2/1 (2019), 60-61.

4 David A. Conway, "The Philosophical Problem of Evil", *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 24/1-2 (1988), 58-60; Michael L. Peterson, *God and Evil: An Introduction to the Issues* (Colorado: Westview Press, 1998), 47.

5 James P. Sterba, *Is a Good God Logically Possible?* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 1. Sterba describes God's attributes using the terms "all-powerful" and "all-good." Therefore, this study adopts these expressions in order to remain faithful to his terminology.

6 For a detailed discussion on the view that Sterba's understanding of evil can be addressed through the God-human relationship, see Elif Nur Erkan Balcı, "Kötülük Problemini Yeniden Konumlandırma: Güncel Bir Tartışmanın Analizi ve Değerlendirilmesi", *Pamukkale Üniversitesi İlahiyat Fakültesi Dergisi* 9/2 (2022), 521.

7 Peter Adamson, "Kindî ve Mutezile: İlâhî Sıfatlar, Yaratma ve Hürriyet", trans. Ali Fikri Yavuz, *Din Felsefesi Açısından Mutezile Gelen-Ek-i: Klasik ve Çağdaş Metinler Seçkisi 1*, comp. Recep Alpyağıl (İstanbul: İz Yayınları, 2014), 188.

8 For an account "expanded theism", see Peterson etc., *Reason and Religious Blief: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion*, 10.

9 Elif Nur Balci, "A Modified Free-Will Defense: A Structural and Theistic Free-Will Defense as a Response to James Sterba", *Religions* 13/700 (2022), 5-6.

balance between wisdom and justice in all His actions. Furthermore, Qāḍī has demonstrated that God takes human needs into account in His actions. He does so through concepts such as *maṣlaḥa*, *luṭf*, *wajh*, *'illa*, *tawallud*, *mubāshir*, and *mufaḍḍal*. With this approach, he proposes a conception of God that respects human dignity and acts in response to human desire (ishtahā), need (ḥāje), benefit (nāfi'a) and pleasure (ladda).[10] Such a conception portrays God as just and benevolent, incapable of evil. Consequently, evil is entirely attributed to human agents, since a God who considers human will and welfare cannot be its source. In this regard, Qāḍī's holistic account of divine agency, grounded in both God's absolute attributes and human contingencies, stands in contrast to Sterba's argument. Furthermore, unlike Sterba, Qāḍī's theology minimizes divine intervention in human moral decisions.

Contrary to Sterba's claims, according to Qāḍī, God's inability to prevent an evil moral act is not considered injustice or oppression. This is because divine actions are based on both metaphysical and human wisdom and are not purposeless or absurd. According to Qāḍī, God acts by establishing a balance between justice and wisdom without violating human will. Like Plantinga, Qāḍī explains evils on the basis of freedom, but evaluates humans not only in terms of their freedom but also in terms of their needs and existential qualities.[11] This approach shows that Sterba's ethical understanding neglects God's transcendence, justice, and wisdom. In this study, it will first be argued that equating God's actions with human actions is a category mistake in the context of Sterba's argument, and then a response to Sterba will be sought within the framework of Qāḍī's views on divine and human actions. To this end, it is necessary to correctly understand the nature of the theistic God and to determine the limits of the God-human relationship.

1. Theoretical Framework: James Sterba's Argument of Moral Evil

The problem of evil remains a relevant issue in the philosophy of religion today, as it evaluates the logical consistency between the God of theism, who is all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-good, and the evil observed in the world. James Sterba has reformulated the problem of evil by employing ethical principles and shifting the focus to the question of why God permits moral evils. His argument can be summarized as follows:

1. God is a being who is all-powerful and all-good.
2. A being that is all-good must prevent moral evils that result in horrendous consequences.
3. There are many moral evils in the world, both in terms of quantity and severity.
4. God does not prevent these evils.
5. Therefore, God does not exist.

Sterba's argument concerning the problem of evil, which can be formulated within the above framework, argues that God, because of his omnipotence and goodness, is responsible for preventing terrible moral evils.[12] His argument against evil is examined in light of Qāḍī's views on divine actions, in connection with the first, second, and fourth points of the above logical formulation. What makes such a comparison possible is Qāḍī's presentation of the relationship between divine action and divine attributes within a rational framework that takes human nature into account. His understanding of divine actions and God's intervention in human actions keeps God away from evil actions while keeping the human element at the center. At the same time, by attributing evil actions to human responsibility, he emphasizes free will and evaluates the context in which God has prepared humans to exercise this will as one that centers on human needs. Qāḍī's approach offers a strong alternative to Sterba's view, which places God in the position of moral agent and burdens Him with the responsibility for evil.[13] This is because Qāḍī argues that God is more of a Communicator than an intervener, explaining the problem of evil within the framework of human will, reason, and moral actions. In this way, divine justice is preserved without contradicting the principles of human freedom and responsibility. In order to understand Qāḍī, it is necessary to distance oneself from Sterba's approach of understanding God within the framework of human principles. Sterba's expectation of justice from God, based on the protection of fundamental human rights, is constructed through a worldly understanding of political justice, which shows that he does not evaluate God within the scope of divine justice. Taking into account Qāḍī's teaching, I suggest that divine actions should be evaluated in terms of the principle of divine justice. It is extremely valuable that he used

10 al-Qāḍī 'Abd al-Jabbār, *al-Mughnī fī ebvābi't-tevḥīd ve'l-'adl*, Critical ed. Muḥammed Ḥıdr Nabḥa (Beyrūt: Dāru'l-Kutubi'l-İlmiyye, 1434/2012), 15/26-27.

11 Hulusi Arslan, "Mutezilî Düşüncede İlâhî Fiil-İnsânî Fiil Ayrımı ve Bu Ayrımın Temel Kriterleri", *Dinî Araştırmalar* 6/16 (2003), 55.

12 Sterba, *Is a Good God Logically Possible*?, 5, 17-18.

13 James P. Sterba, "An Ethics without God That is Compatible with Darwinian Evolution", *Religions* 15/781 (2024), 10; Hasan Ocak, *Tanrı-İnsan İlişkisi Bağlamında İnsanın Hürriyeti* (Ankara: Ek Kitap, 2012), 204-206.

divine justice not as a metaphysical unknowability, but as an element of balance between divine attributes and human nature. This is because Qāḍī interprets divine justice not as a mystery concealed by God's unknowability, but as a dynamic principle of balance established between God's power and goodness and human freedom, needs, and responsibility. With this interpretation, Qāḍī, like Sterba, assigns a dynamic role to God. However, while refraining from judging God by human moral standards, he shows that the relationship between God and humans can be understood on the basis of justice. Therefore, contrary to Sterba's understanding, which limits God to worldly principles of justice, Qāḍī takes into account both human needs and divine attributes in divine justice. Thus, divine justice is preserved without contradicting the principles of human freedom and responsibility.

Sterba holds both human beings and God accountable for morally horrendous human actions, arguing that God's permission of such acts is morally equivalent to committing them. Here, Sterba, as in the evidential problem of evil,[14] draws attention to the quantitative and qualitative excess of evil, questioning why God refrains from preventing not merely ordinary but extreme forms of evil.[15] Through this approach, Sterba risks overlooking the metaphysical dimension of divine will by assessing God's inaction within the limited framework of human moral standards. Indeed, Sterba's classification has been subject to criticism, as Michael S. Jones questions who determines the boundary between what counts as horrendous and non-horrendous evils. According to Jones, if it is possible that God is already preventing evils far more horrendous than those we observe, then the evils Sterba designates as "horrendous" may, in fact, be comparatively less grave.[16] This ambiguity significantly undermines Sterba's argument. The criterion distinguishing "horrendous" from "non-horrendous" evils is arbitrary and unexplained, nullifying the claim that the argument rests on an objective basis and ultimately leaving the evaluative process to subjective interpretation.

Sterba situates both God and human beings within the framework of responsibility for horrendous evil through the concept of *intervention*. Accordingly, a person's intervention in morally horrendous actions consists either in preventing or failing to prevent them; and when the person chooses to intervene to prevent such an action, the intervention is either fully successful or proves insufficient. In cases where human intervention proves inadequate, Sterba maintains that God is morally obligated to act in order to ensure the success of that intervention. Conversely, if a human refrains from intervening altogether, responsibility for the ensuing evil rests with the human agent. God, on the other hand, is regarded as a being who ought to prevent horrendous evil in all cases, regardless of whether or not humans intervene.[17] Analogous to how human beings are duty-bound to respect the fundamental rights of others, God, by virtue of His omnipotence, bears the obligation to protect human beings from significant harm. Sterba adopts the theistic understanding of God's omnipotence as limited to what is logically possible,[18] and within this framework, he emphasizes that God still possesses the power to sustain beings, thereby offering a critical evaluation of the theists' concept of omnipotence.[19] Therefore, he considers God's absolute attributes only insofar as they ground a moral responsibility attributed to God.

Sterba argues that God does not intervene even in non-horrendous evils. He uses the exception conditions derived from the Pauline principle within the Doctrine of Double Effect, which is at the center of moral philosophy, to determine the minimum threshold for such evils. This threshold delineates the minimal moral standard expected of human behavior. These exception principles, which explain the least morally wrong behavior of individuals, are not considered serious moral evils when committed by humans. However, according to Sterba, God does not even fulfil the necessary conditions to prevent these minimal evils.[20] He categorizes these evils, which he refers to as the necessary conditions for preventing moral wrongdoing, under three main criteria.

1. "Trivial (e.g., as in the case of stepping on someone's foot to get out of a crowded subway),
2. Easily reparable (e.g., as in the case of flying to a temporarily depressed friend to keep her from committing suicide.

[14] For instance, William Rowe (d. 2015) has been criticized for addressing only horrendous and intensive evils in his argument from evil. See Rowe, "Friendly Atheism, Skeptical Theism and the Problem of Evil," 80; Peter van Inwagen, "The Problem of Evil," *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Religion*, ed. William J. Wainwright (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 203–204.

[15] James P. Sterba, "There is no Free-Will Defense", *Oxford Studies in Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Jonathan L. Kvanvig (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 294.

[16] Michael S. Jones, "Sterba's Problem of Evil vs. Sterba's Problem of Specificity: Which is the Real Problem?" *Religions* 13/11 (2022), 5.

[17] Sterba, *Is a Good God Logically Possible?*, 132-133.

[18] Plantinga, *Tanrı, Özgürlük ve Kötülük*, 54-55.

[19] James Sterba – Richard Swinburne, *Could a Good God Permit So Much Suffering: A Debate* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2024), 2-3.

[20] Sterba, *Is a Good God Logically Possible?,* 44, 49-50.

> There is also disagreement over whether a further exception to the principle obtains when the resulting evil or harm is:
>
> 3. The only way to prevent a far greater harm to innocent people (e.g., as in the case of shooting one of twenty civilian hostages to prevent, in the only way possible, the execution of all twenty.)"[21]

In this context, Sterba applies these categories of evil to divine action and reaches the following conclusions:

> 1."MEPR I prohibits God's provision of goods (1) by permitting significant and especially horrendous consequences of immoral actions.
>
> 2.MEPR II eliminates any need for goods (2) and goods (3) by requiring God's prevention of significant and especially horrendous consequences of immoral actions.
>
> 3. MEPR III prohibits God's provision of goods (4) by permitting significant and especially horrendous consequences of immoral actions."[22]

According to Sterba, there is no moral difference between God committing evil acts and allowing humans to commit them; both are equally reprehensible. This perspective reflects a result-oriented approach to moral reasoning, which holds that if an action leads to a terrible evil, it remains morally terrible whether it is carried out directly by God or only with His permission. However, Sterba does not concern the question of why God allows evils that fall within the category of moral wrongs requiring prevention. For him, the central problem is that God fails to intervene even in those evils outlined in the minimal principles, and, by extension, in evils that lead to horrendous consequences.[23] He states as follows: "Why then in the actual world could not God, like the superheroes in our fictional world, be more involved in preventing evils that result in the loss of significant freedom for their victims?"[24] He characterizes horrendous evils as those that inflict such extreme harm that they cannot be justified even in pursuit of a greater good. Therefore, Sterba argues that it is necessary for God, by virtue of His all-powerful and all-good, to prevent the evils in the world that are both vast in number and grave in nature.[25] Against Sterba's claims, various criticisms have been raised, paralleling objections to evidential arguments from evil, the most prominent of which is *skeptical theism*. Skeptical theism maintains that, in light of the limitations of human knowledge relative to God's omniscience, it is difficult to explain why God would permit horrendous evils.[26] However, in this study, since the focus is on God's non-intervention in worldly evils, it is more appropriate to concentrate on His actions rather than on His knowledge.

Sterba acknowledges that the idea that God must intervene in terrible evils can be perceived as a challenge to human freedom. To address this concern, he proposes a distinction between significant freedoms and additional freedoms. According to Sterba, human freedom can be justifiably suspended in situations where significant freedoms, understood as the vital rights of individuals, are at risk. This is because the protection of individual freedoms is only meaningful insofar as it does not result in horrendous harm to others. For instance, an assault on a person or a threat to their life pertains to their significant freedoms, which, in Sterba's view, must be protected.[27] He identifies the violation of significant freedoms, particularly the right to life, as a source of horrendous evil. By framing human freedom of action within the language of rights, Sterba shifts the problem of evil from an epistemological foundation to an ethical one.[28] Since he defends free will from a rights-based perspective, he considers it legitimate for God to intervene and restrict the free will of a perpetrator. This intervention aims to prevent another person from being subjected to horrendous moral evil. This approach implies that Sterba holds God responsible for the terrible consequences of evil actions implies that Sterba holds God responsible for the terrible consequences of evil actions, because only God can limit human will. Therefore, God must prevent individuals who are about to commit evil actions from exercising their free will before the actions occur. However, this understanding necessitates constant divine intervention in human affairs. Within the context of theism, it raises critical questions regarding the implications for human reward or punishment in the afterlife.

The idea that God must restrict human free will to prevent horrendous moral evils is illustrated by Sterba through an analogy. In this analogy, the ruler of an ideally just state bears the responsibility of protecting the fundamental rights of its citizens. However, such a ruler cannot monitor every injustice

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21 Sterba, *Is a Good God Logically Possible?*, 2-3.
22 James P. Sterba, "Sixteen Contributors: A Response", *Religions* 12/536 (2021), 4.
23 Sterba, *Is a Good God Logically Possible?*, 50-51.
24 Sterba, "There is no Free-Will Defense", 302.
25 Sterba, *Is a Good God Logically Possible?*, 1, 61.
26 Stephen Wykstra, "A Skeptical Theist View", *God and the Problem of Evil*, ed. William L. Rowe (Malden, Massachusetts: Wiley-Blackwell, 2001), 105-108.
27 Sterba, *Is a Good God Logically Possible?*, 11, 14.
28 Erkan Balcı, "Kötülük Problemini Yeniden Konumlandırma: Güncel Bir Tartışmanın Analizi ve Değerlendirilmesi", 507-508.

committed within the state and is limited to intervening only in cases of horrendous injustice. When necessary, the ruler restricts the freedom of those who violate the rights of others. Sterba's assertion that *"(…) the two authorities are completely analogous"*[29] reveals his view that the authority of God and that of a human ruler are entirely comparable. Based on this analogy, Sterba argues that God, as the Creator, bears the responsibility to protect the fundamental rights of human beings and must intervene in cases of horrendous moral evil.[30]

Here, the idealization of a just state functions as a reference to God's absolute qualities. However, comparing God to humans shows that classical theism ignores the metaphysical aspects of God's nature and qualities; in classical theism, such absolute qualities belong only to God, who necessarily exists.[31] This article will examine the idea that there may be different dynamics that cause divine action to occur, in light of Qāḍī's views. However, before doing so, it is necessary to emphasize that divine action and human action are different and therefore must be evaluated according to different criteria.

2. Understanding God and Human Actions with the Concept of "Category Mistake"

Sterba's treatment of divine actions within the moral framework applied to human actions in the problem of evil raises the issue of the epistemological, ontological, and moral distinctions between God and human beings. As he notes, "(…) where he argued that the grounds for obligations to God and the grounds for our obligations to an ideally just political state are different. There, I argued that two authorities are completely analogous."[32] Therefore, before addressing the nature of divine or human actions, attention must be drawn to the fact that their actions are subject to different criteria.

Sterba's approach can be interpreted through Gilbert Ryle's (d. 1976) concept of a category mistake, which he used to critique dualist ontologies.[33] *In the Concept of Mind* (1949), Ryle targets Descartes (d. 1650), rejecting the Cartesian view that treats mind and body within the same ontological category as illusory. He argues that the mind and body must be explained through distinct conceptual frameworks: "The differences between the physical and the mental were thus represented as differences inside the common framework of the categories of "thing", "stuff", "attribute", "state", "process", "change", "cause", and "effect". Minds are things, but different sorts of things from bodies; mental processes are causes and effects, but different sorts of causes and effects from bodily movements."[34] With this, Ryle emphasizes that abstract qualities such as consciousness, intention, and intelligence cannot be reduced to observable physical behavior.[35] This distinction between abstract and concrete entities may likewise be applied to Sterba's views on divine and human moral actions.

Sterba emphasizes that God should act in accordance with moral principles and prevent horrendous evils; however, he does not account for the ontological distinction between God and human beings. According to him, since divine actions are based entirely on powerful and perfect goodness, God must not commit even the kind of evil that can be observed in human actions. By evaluating divine attributes of all-powerful and goodness in the same manner as human attributes of power and moral virtue, Sterba adopts an anthropomorphic view of the divine. However, Sterba's approach should be assessed in light of the claim in Islamic thought that God is fundamentally a metaphysical problem.[36] In this respect, his perspective can be evaluated through Ryle's following statement:

> "The theoretically interesting category-mistakes are those made by people who are perfectly competent to apply concepts, at least in the situations with which they are familiar, but are still liable in their abstract thinking to allocate those concepts to logical types to which they do not belong."[37]

Given Sterba's approach to divine actions, it can be argued that such category mistakes hinder the proper placement of concepts, particularly in moral and religious discourse. Indeed, Sterba's attempt to account for divine actions through ethical principles carries the risk of reducing the concept of God to a merely logical construct, thereby rendering his view susceptible to the aforementioned category errors. Sterba's failure to distinguish between God and humans in the context of moral obligations has been a

29 Sterba, "Sixteen Contributors: A Response", 17.
30 Sterba, *Is a Good God Logically Possible?*, 59.
31 Peterson etc., *Reason and Religious Blief: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion*, 106.
32 Sterba, "Forty Contributors: A Response", 25.
33 Brian Davies is one of the scholars who employs the concept of category mistake in discussions of the problem of evil. However, he limits its application to the view that conceives of God as a moral agent and therefore holds Him accountable for moral actions, which he regards as a category mistake. See Brian Davies, *The Reality of God and the Problem of Evil* (London - New York: Continuum, 2006), 103. In this study, the notion of category mistake is employed more broadly to highlight the fundamental difference between divine and human actions.
34 Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind* (London – New York: Routledge, 2009), 9.
35 Ryle, *The Concept of Mind*, 37.
36 İbn Sînâ, *İlâhiyât-ı Şifâ: Metafizik*, trans. Ekrem Demirli – Ömer Türker (İstanbul: Vakıflar Genel Müdürlüğü Yayınları, 2011), 19.
37 Ryle, *The Concept of Mind*, 7.

point of critical focus for J. Brian Huffling. He, drawing on Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274), questions the attribution of moral virtues to God and contends that God is not subject to any moral obligations. Within this framework, Huffling argues that predicates such as justice should not be used univocally between God and creatures, and that the meaning these predicates convey for humans differs from their application to God. Thus, to assert that God is just, does not entail imposing an obligation upon Him. This is because, according to Huffling, those who regard God as immoral fail to recognize the distinction between Creator and creature.[38] Huffling's assessment of the relationship between God and morality serves to corroborate our inference that Sterba commits a human-centered categorical error by ascribing moral obligations to God. Huffling's views find a parallel in Islamic theology in the works of Qāḍī in the late 10th century. Qāḍī argued that God is not bound by any necessity or obligation in His actions and emphasized that divine acts should be understood solely as manifestations of divine wisdom and justice.[39] Within this framework, Huffling and Qāḍī clearly demonstrate that, in both Christian and Islamic thought, divine actions cannot be reduced to human actions.

In classical theism, God is defined, in a manner distinct from humans, as "(…) a transcendent spiritual being who is omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good."[40] Consequently, given that each concept must be defined within its own epistemological and ontological framework, discussions regarding the assessability of divine actions must first recognize this categorical distinction. However, Sterba's treatment of God within the same ethical responsibility framework as human beings presents a philosophical and theological challenge. To equate God and human beings in moral terms would, as Ryle notes, constitute "(…) not merely an assemblage of particular mistakes. It is one big mistake and a mistake of a special kind."[41] In this context, it is essential that each concept be considered within the category to which it properly belongs.

Although theism is not itself a religion, it represents the belief framework of the three monotheistic religions.[42] While approaching theism in relation to these religions does not align with the notion of *"restricted theism"*[43] commonly adopted by contemporary Anglo-American philosophers of religion, Sterba's failure to clarify what he means by theism does not preclude us from engaging with his argument in light of doctrines from Islamic thought. Within this framework, the doctrine of action and morality developed by al-Qāḍī ʿAbd al-Jabbār will be examined in response to Sterba's argument from evil. Sterba's category mistake will be evaluated through Qāḍī's perspective, which offers moral and rational explanations for the distinction between divine and human actions in Islamic theology.

3. The Theoretical Basis of Moral Evil and Responsibility al-Qāḍī 'Abd al-Jabbār's Understanding of Action

In Islamic thought, the divinely ordained balance of justice is established between divine power, knowledge, and will. On this subject, Qāḍī develops a rational and comprehensible doctrine to explain divine actions through the concepts of justice and wisdom, rather than through agnosticism.[44] In this context, his example of a judge to explain the relationship between justice and action is noteworthy. A just judge decides according to the demands of justice between parties.[45] In this framework, divine actions cannot be evaluated as arbitrary or necessary in his system; these actions are shaped by the principles of justice and wisdom. Qāḍī's approach makes divine justice both transcendent and comprehensible to reason.

3.1. The Role of the Attributes of Power, Knowledge, and Will in Divine Action

A different perspective on the role of divine attributes in moral action is found in Islamic thought, where theologians such as Qāḍī ʿAbd al-Jabbār argue that divine attributes must be understood in the context of God's principles of justice and wisdom.[46] According to him, these attributes do not necessitate specific divine actions; rather, God acts in a way that takes into account human interests and wisdom.[47]

38 J. Brian Huffling, "The Problem of Evil and God's Moral Standing: A Rejoinder to James Sterba", *Religions* 13/11 (2022), 4-5.

39 Abdunnasır Süt, *Mu'tezile ve Ahlâk: Kadı Abdulcebbar Örneği* (İstanbul: İz Yayıncılık, 2016), 224-225; Tahsin Görgün, "Hüsün-Kubuh Meselesi: Kadı Abdülcebbar'ın Yaklaşım Şeklinin Tahlilî Bir Tasviri veya Toplumsal Varlığı Sürdürmenin Ma'kul Yolları Üzerine Bir Araştırma", *İslâm Araştırmaları Dergisi* 5 (2001), 80-81.

40 Peterson etc., *Reason and Religious Blief: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion*, 10.

41 Peterson etc., *Reason and Religious Blief: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion*, 10.

42 Peterson etc., *Reason and Religious Blief: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion*, 10-11.

43 William L. Rowe, "Friendly Atheism, Skeptical Theism and the Problem of Evil", *International Journal of Philosophy of Religion* 59 (2006), 85-86.

44 George F. Hourani, "Kadı Abdülcebbâr'ın Rasyonalist Ahlak Anlayışı, trans. Adem İrmak – Emine Özkan Saykal, *Din Felsefesi Açısından Mutezile Gelen-Ek-i: Klasik ve Çağdaş Metinler Seçkisi 2*, comp. Recep Alpyağıl (İstanbul: İz Yayıncılık, 2017), 42-52, 43.

45 al-Qāḍī 'Abd al-Jabbār, *al-Mughnī*, 6-1/48.

46 Eric L. Ormsby, *Theodicy in Islamic Thought* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1984), 16.

47 Yunus Cengiz, *Mu'tezile'de Eylem Teorisi: Kâdî Abdülcebbâr Örneği* (İstanbul: Düşün Yayıncılık, 2012), 225.

Although God has the power to perform evil acts, He refrains from doing so because it would be contrary to the principle of justice.

While Qāḍī emphasizes justice and wisdom rather than intervention, Sterba, in contrast, approaches divine goodness through the lens of action against evil. Sterba's approach, however, has been the subject of substantial critique within contemporary philosophical discourse. Bruce R. Reichenbach, a contemporary philosopher of religion, critiques Sterba's perspective by framing it within the notion of meticulous providence. In this context, Reichenbach challenges Sterba's claim that divine intervention is required solely in cases of horrendous evil, questioning whether such a requirement can coherently be taken as evidence of God's goodness. According to Reichenbach, Sterba reduces God's role in the world to that of an over-regulating, interventionist authority. Using the state-citizen analogy, he further critiques Sterba's insistence that God's selective intervention against only horrendous evils constitutes a necessary act of meticulous providence, arguing that this demand neither aligns with human freedom nor with the nature of divine sovereignty, and instead risks portraying God as a totalizing controller.[48] This assessment highlights the vulnerability of Sterba's understanding of divine goodness to critique.

Another line of criticism regarding Sterba's reduction of divine goodness to action comes from Toby Betenson, who contends that divine goodness does not necessarily have to conform to the moral standards applicable to humans, contrary to Sterba's assumption.[49] God's metaphysical nature is qualitatively distinct from that of humans, and any comparison that fails to account for this distinction results in a reductionist conception of the divine. Sterba's claim that Betenson's view does not provide a satisfactory solution to the problem of evil within a theistic framework,[50] could similarly be directed at Qāḍī, who maintains that divine attributes are fundamentally different from human attributes. However, for a philosophical problem to be addressed consistently, the relevant concepts must be defined within their proper epistemological and ontological contexts. Thus, evaluating divine actions solely in comparison to human actions reveals only a limited aspect of divine reality and hinders the comprehension of God's absolute qualities that differentiate Him from human beings.[51] On the other hand, approaches that seek to explain divine actions exclusively through reference to God's attributes carry the risk of exposing the divine will to charges of arbitrariness. Indeed, Sterba's question as to why God does not prevent horrendous evils illustrates that he assesses divine actions not in terms of their purpose or causality, but purely in terms of their consequences. Yet if divine actions were to be examined with reference to causality or purpose, God's metaphysical nature would necessarily have to be included in such an evaluation.

Qāḍī argues that divine actions cannot be explained solely by reference to God's attributes; rather, they must be understood in light of the principles of justice and wisdom that govern how God relates to human beings. Accordingly, while divine power is sufficient to accomplish all things, this does not imply that God engages in evil actions. Although He has knowledge of them, He refrains from performing them.[52] In support of his view that evil acts are attributable to human agency rather than to God, Qāḍī further maintains that human actions are not predetermined or created by God; rather, human beings themselves are the sole agents of their acts. In this way, he designates the human beings as the sole agents responsible for their actions. Qāḍī's characterization of those who commit evil acts as unbelievers indicates that he considers all forms of evil to originate from human agency.[53] At the same time, God, in His actions, takes into account human needs, benefits, harms, pleasures, perceptions, and desires, and thus establishes a relationship with humanity that is both attentive and compassionate.[54] In Qāḍī's framework, divine behavior is neither arbitrary nor reducible to necessity, because God's actions are governed not by a compelling ʿilla but by the principles of justice and wisdom, which guide divine action without imposing external constraint.[55] However, one should not infer from Qāḍī's view that God, like human beings, is dependent on external motives in order to act. According to him, divine actions should not be explained by an ʿilla that compels God to act, but rather by the concepts of *dāʿī* and *ʿilla*, which are not necessary in themselves but which prioritize human needs, benefits, and grace.[56] Therefore, God's actions should be

48 Bruce R. Reichenbach, "God, Evil, and Meticulous Providence", *Religions* 13/899 (2022), 5-7.
49 Toby Betenson, "The Problem of Evil Remains Logically Binding", *Religions* 12/154 (2021), 1-11, 10.
50 Sterba, "Sixteen Contributors: A Response", 17.
51 Mehmet Ata Az, "Tanrı'nın Sıfatları", *Din Felsefesi*, ed. Latif Tokat (Ankara: BİLAY Yayınları, 2018), 123-138, 123-124.
52 al-Qāḍī 'Abd al-Jabbār, *al-Mughnī*, 6-1/143.
53 Fauzan Saleh, *The Problem of Evil in Islamic Theology: A Study on the Concept of al-Qabīh in al-Qadi 'Abd al-Hamadhani's Thought* (Montreal: McGill University, Institute of Islamic Studies, 1992), 108, 111, 191.
54 See al-Qāḍī 'Abd al-Jabbār, *al-Mughnī*, 4/8-30. For detailed information on the human conditions that al-Qāḍī 'Abd al-Jabbār took into consideration in human actions, see Cengiz, *Mu'tezile'de Eylem Teorisi: Kâdî Abdülcebbâr Örneği*, 207-208, 219-243.
55 Hourani, "Kadı Abdülcebbâr'ın Rasyonalist Ahlak Anlayışı", 49.
56 Ömer Türker, "İlâhî Fiillerin Nedenliliği Sorunu: Gazzâlî'nin Meseleye Yaklaşımı ve Katkısı", *İslâm Araştırmaları Dergisi* 17 (2007), 5, 13.

understood neither as entirely necessary nor arbitrary; instead, they should be interpreted in a balanced manner in accordance with the principles of justice and wisdom. For Qāḍī, explaining divine actions through justice and wisdom implies that God cannot engage in evil acts:

> "When we describe God as 'adl and ḥakīm, we mean that He never commits ugly acts, never chooses ugly deeds, never violates what is obligatory upon Him, and that all His deeds are good. (…) God knows the ugliness of ugly deeds and is independent of them, and He also knows that He is independent of them. It is impossible for someone in this situation to prefer anything ugly."[57]

In the passage above, Qāḍī, in contrast to Sterba's approach that confines God to worldly standards of justice, offers a theologically and philosophically coherent response to the problem of evil by grounding divine justice on a transcendent yet intelligible level. In this context, wisdom is not invoked as a mere expression of epistemological ignorance but rather as the discernment of the most appropriate course of action insofar as it is justified by justice. The relationship that Qāḍī establishes between wisdom and justice reveals the integration of epistemology and ethics in his thought. Wisdom and justice, in his thought, indicate that divine power does not devolve into arbitrariness, divine knowledge does not entail necessity, and divine will does not lead to randomness. Accordingly, Huffling challenges Sterba's suggestion that God acts arbitrarily, insisting that divine actions, grounded in attributes such as justice and goodness, must be evaluated differently from human actions. He argues that the moral virtues ascribed to God are not equivalent to those of humans.[58] Qāḍī similarly preserves this distinction, understanding wisdom as a moral axis governing the operation of other divine attributes. For instance, according to this conception, a just God does not commit injustice even though He possesses the power to do so. Indeed, Qāḍī asserts that it is neither rationally nor morally tenable to accuse God of injustice merely on the grounds of His omnipotence.[59] Reichenbach, critiquing Sterba from a perspective aligned with Qāḍī's emphasis on human free will, argues that God's continuous intervention in the world would lead to chaos, thus constraining human rational and moral agency. In his view, without order and regularity, humans could not rationally plan or calculate which actions to undertake to achieve specific ends.[60] Qāḍī's position aligns with Reichenbach's critique of intensive divine intervention by asserting that if a human action must be evaluated or prevented, this should be done by other knowledgeable agents, termed "knowing subjects", who fully understand the consequences of their actions.[61] He states, "If God were the agent of injustice, then the basis of condemnation, contempt, and similar judgments would be ascribed to Him. Yet God is exalted above such things."[62] Accordingly, when God shows the correct path to individuals, their actions result from their own choices made through free will. In Qāḍī's thought, the evaluation or prevention of a human action is a task for others, designated as "knowing subjects", who are aware of the implications of that action.[63] This principle indicates that Sterba's expectation for divine intervention in human wrongdoing is, in Qāḍī's account, redirected toward other human agents who are not the originators of the act itself. While Sterba ultimately holds God accountable for morally evil actions, Qāḍī places responsibility on both the moral agent and the evaluator, attributing full accountability to human beings. This framework positions humans at the center as autonomous agents grounded in free will and moral responsibility, while distancing God from direct responsibility for these acts. Thus, in Qāḍī's system, divine non-intervention is not indicative of injustice but rather a deliberate granting of moral autonomy to human beings.

Qāḍī also grounds human responsibility in God's act of granting humans a temporal reprieve. According to him, God has given individuals a period of respite so that they may exercise their free will, thereby becoming eligible for reward for good actions and punishment for bad ones. Furthermore, Qāḍī distinguishes between direct (mubāshir) and derivative (mutawallid) actions to analyze human agency more precisely.[64] Mubāshir actions are those performed immediately by the agent—for example, speaking a word, striking someone, giving alms, or consciously refraining from an act. Mutawallid actions are the secondary effects or consequences that arise from those primary acts—such as the injury caused by a blow, the economic loss resulting from a decision, or the chain of harmful acts triggered by an order. By this distinction, Qāḍī holds individuals accountable not only for their immediate, direct acts but also for the foreseeable outcomes those acts generate. He states:

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57 Kadı Abdülcebbâr, *Mu'tezile'nin Beş İlkesi: Şerhu'l-Usûli'l-hamse*, trans. İlyas Çelebi (İstanbul: Türkiye Yazma Eserler Kurumu Başkanlığı, 2013) 2/9.

58 Huffling, "The Problem of Evil and God's Moral Standing: A Rejoinder to James Sterba", 4.

59 George Hourani, *Islamic Rationalism: The Ethics of Abd al-Jabbar* (London: Oxford Universty Press, 1971), 97-100.

60 Reichenbach, "God, Evil, and Meticulous Providence", 8.

61 al-Qāḍī 'Abd al-Jabbār, *al-Mughnī*, 6-1/87.

62 Kâdî Abdülcebbâr, *Mu'tezile'nin Beş İlkesi: Şerhu'l-Usûli'l-hamse*, 84-86.

63 al-Qāḍī 'Abd al-Jabbār, *al-Mughnī*, 6-1/26; 11/136.

64 al-Qāḍī 'Abd al-Jabbār, *al-Mughnī*, 6/2, 262-264.

> "The Mu'tazila (people of 'adl) agree that the actions of servants are their own, that their sitting and standing are caused by themselves; God, has made them capable of this, but there is no agent or originator of these actions other than themselves. Whoever says that God, is the agent and originator of these actions has committed a grave mistake."[65]

In the above passage, Qāḍī attributes the responsibility for human actions to the moral agent. Although God shares certain attributes and terms with human beings, this resemblance does not justify categorizing them within the same evaluative framework. For instance, while the concept of reason exists in both God and humans, divine ḥikma is treated within the context of divine wisdom.[66] In this regard, Sterba's critique of God based on human moral standards neglects the transcendent nature of God in theistic traditions and the space afforded to human free will, effectively reducing metaphysical reality to earthly terms. According to Qāḍī, however, every divine action is grounded in a benefit, grace, or retributive wisdom that ultimately serves human interests. Thus, God's non-intervention in the face of horrendous evil acquires meaning within Qāḍī's thought through these concepts. Interpreted in this light, divine actions in Qāḍī's system are stripped of the compulsory moral demands present in Sterba's view, which assumes that God must prevent such evils. As can be seen, the principles of wisdom and justice constitute foundational pillars in Muʿtazilite theology. These principles provide the logical foundation for the claim that while God has the capacity to commit evil, He refrains from doing so and consistently chooses the good.[67] In contrast, Sterba interprets God's failure to intervene in observable evil purely from the perspective of moral inaction.

3.2. Maṣlaḥa and Luṭf as Dynamics Underlying Divine Action

Divine actions, in Qāḍī's account, are determined by the principles of ḥikma and ʿadl; the benefits that accrue to human beings are the manifestations of these principles, not the criteria by which divine actions are judged. Divine actions that appear painful or punitive from a human perspective may initially seem evil; however, according to Qāḍī, such actions possess a beneficial purpose grounded in justice and wisdom.[68] Therefore, it is difficult to judge whether an event is good or evil based solely on its outward appearance; the purpose of the action must also be taken into account. This approach provides a different perspective from Sterba's, which focuses on the consequences of actions. Sterba evaluates God's inability to prevent terrible evils based on their visible outcomes. In contrast, Qāḍī does not explain God's actions in terms of necessity as is the case with humans; rather, he asserts that God performs an action only if there is a benefit, wisdom, or mercy involved. In this context, the fact that an action is painful is not sufficient in itself to classify it as evil. This understanding reflects a perspective where moral value is determined by intention and purpose.[69]

Both Qāḍī and Sterba agree that the moral worth of actions rests on an objective foundation.[70] Yet the basis of this objectivity sharply diverges in their accounts. Qāḍī locates it in the divine purpose and intention that ground every act, whereas Sterba anchors it in the moral assessment of consequences. For Qāḍī, outcomes do not constitute moral value but merely manifest the underlying ḥikma and ʿadl that structure divine action.[71] As he states, "(…) God does what is best for the person concerned. Because that way, one comes closer to avoiding evil."[72]

From Qāḍī's perspective, divine actions that occasion pain are not performed with the aim of harming human beings. Such pains are classified as good insofar as they participate in a purposive order grounded in ḥikma and maṣlaḥa.[73] In contrast to Sterba, who interprets God's actions in terms of the benefit or harm they produce for creatures,[74] Qāḍī evaluates divine agency strictly through the categories of justice, rightness (ṣaḥīḥ), and benefit understood as ṣalāḥ.[75] Within this normative framework, God acts by virtue of a prior reason (dāʿī) that motivates and justifies the act; this reason either directly secures

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65 al-Qāḍī 'Abd al-Jabbār, *al-Mughnī*, 8/3.

66 Hourani, "Kadı Abdülcebbâr'ın Rasyonalist Ahlak Anlayışı", 49; Maha Elkaisy-Friemuth, *God and Humans in Islamic Thought: 'Abd al-Jabbār, Ibn Sīnā and al-Ghazālī*, (London-New York: Routledge, 2006), 51-52.

67 Ayman Shihadeh, "Theories of Ethical Value in Kalām: A New Interpretation", *The Oxford Handbook of Islamic Theology*, ed. Sabine Schmidtke (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 385-386.

68 al-Qāḍī 'Abd al-Jabbār, *al-Mughnī*, 13/103.

69 Metin Özdemir, *İslâm Düşüncesinde Kötülük Problemi* (İstanbul: Furkan Kitaplığı, 2001), 82, 87.

70 Sterba –Swinburne, *Could a Good God Permit So Much Suffering: A Debate*, 6; Adem Ertunç, *Mu'tezile'de Allah-İnsan İlişkisi: Kâdî Abdülcebbâr Örneği* (İstanbul: Endülüs, 2023), 34-36; Görgün, "Hüsün-Kubuh Meselesi: Kadı Abdülcebbar'ın Yaklaşım Şeklinin Tahlilî Bir Tasviri veya Toplumsal Varlığı Sürdürmenin Ma'kul Yolları Üzerine Bir Araştırma", 59.

71 Sterba, *Is a Good God Logically Possible?*, 51, 181.

72 Kadı Abdülcebbâr, "Allah'ın Fiilleri Olarak Eylemler ve Gerçekleşme Sebepleri", trans. Mahsum Aytepe, *Din Felsefesi Açısından Mu'tezile Gelen-Ek-i: Klasik ve Çağdaş Metinler Seçkisi*, comp. Recep Alpyağıl (İstanbul: İz Yayınları, 2017), 322-323.

73 Kadı Abdülcebbâr, "Allah'ın Fiilleri Olarak Eylemler ve Gerçekleşme Sebepleri", 328.

74 Sterba, "Sixteen Contributors: A Response", 4.

75 al-Qāḍī 'Abd al-Jabbār, *al-Mughnī*, 14/56.

benefit or establishes the conditions for its realization.[76] Hence, for Qāḍī, divine justice is anchored not merely in the creature's advantage but in the rational and purposive warrant that grounds the very act of creation. At this point, Qāḍī diverges from Sterba's model, which assigns moral responsibility to God on the basis of human-centered outcomes. Instead, he insists that the justice and intelligibility of divine action do not depend on consistently generating creaturely goods. In this regard, Qāḍī's position, according to which the existence of evil may rest on an alternative divine rationale, resonates with Erik J. Wielenberg's recent responses to Sterba's argument from evil. Wielenberg entertains either the presence of a good that outweighs horrendous evils or the prevention of a greater evil, thereby situating evil within a broader justificatory structure.[77] Yet, while Qāḍī grounds this structure in divine wisdom and purposive order, Wielenberg articulates it through probabilistic and logical modalities characteristic of contemporary analytic philosophy of religion.

In Qāḍī's view, God's creative acts take place with consideration for human tendencies such as perception, pleasure, pain, desire, and need faculties that play a fundamental role in shaping human interaction with the external world. This indicates that divine actions possess a structure attentive to human welfare. In this sense, the act of creation bears a quality that directly benefits humankind.[78] However, these human conditions are neither unlimited nor inherently necessary for divine action; rather, they are regulated and determined by the principle of wisdom.

Although Qāḍī explains divine acts in terms of benefit, wisdom, motivation (dāʿī), and causal structure (ʿilla), he maintains that God's actions cannot be made necessary by any external cause. Instead, they must be understood within the framework of *tafaḍḍul*, *graceful bestowal (tafaḍḍul)*.[79] The concept of tafaḍḍul affirms that while God may bestow a benefit, He is not morally obligated to do so, nor is He blameworthy if He refrains from acting. According to this approach, God acts freely and wisely, not out of compulsion, when choosing to do good or to prevent evil.[80] Therefore, Sterba's claim that God is morally responsible, alongside humans, for not preventing moral evils does not find ground in Qāḍī's thought. In his system, moral responsibility for evil is attributed solely to human agents. Since divine benevolence and the prevention of evil are not necessary duties incumbent upon God, moral evils are instead explained through the lens of human free will and God's non-compulsory but wise actions.[81] Qāḍī affirms that while God never commits evil and is intrinsically beyond injustice, He is also not under an external obligation to bestow good in every instance; rather, His choosing the good is an expression of divine grace (tafaḍḍul), not a compulsory duty.[82] In this context, Qāḍī's approach shifts the problem of evil away from a framework of divine necessity and offers an evaluative model grounded in benefit and gracious bestowal, preserving both divine justice and human moral responsibility.

3.3. The Concept of *Wajh* in Moral Values

Qāḍī's understanding of action not only defends the objective moral value of actions but also considers the context in which these values acquire meaning. As mentioned earlier, the needs arising from human nature and God's consideration of human benefit and goodness in His actions provide the context in which Qāḍī explains his objective moral judgments.[83] He uses the concept of wajh to express the explanation of an action according to its context. "In Qāḍī's account, what determines whether an action is good or bad before it is morally qualified is not the act in isolation but the *muqtedī*, the morally relevant factor, which provides the *wajh*, that is, the evaluative aspect through which the act is judged."[84] However, it is important to note that Qāḍī uses the term "cause" (ʿilla) not as a necessitating factor compelling God to act, but as a non-coercive justificatory ground (*dāʿī*) that renders an action appropriate in light of wisdom (ḥikma). This notion indicates neither external causation nor internal psychological motivation, but a rational basis that explains why a divine act is fitting without imposing necessity upon God.[85] In Qāḍī's view, the cause is not a form of causality explaining the relationship between entities in metaphysics or an element compelling the subject to act, but rather a dynamic that makes the action good.[86] Therefore, the interpretation advanced by scholars such as Hourani, that Qāḍī's position is relativistic, an interpretation inferred from his definition of the concept of wajh as the potential to alter

76 al-Qāḍī 'Abd al-Jabbār, *al-Mughnī*, 6-1/47; 11/113, 119.
77 Erik J. Wielenberg, "Sterba's Logical Argument from Evil and the God Who Walks Away from Omelas", *Religions* 13/9 (2022), 3-4.
78 Cengiz, *Mu'tezile'de Eylem Teorisi: Kâdî Abdülcebbâr Örneği*, 225-226.
79 al-Qāḍī 'Abd al-Jabbār, *al-Mughnī*, 14/24-28.
80 al-Qāḍī 'Abd al-Jabbār, *al-Mughnī*, 6-1/48.
81 al-Qāḍī 'Abd al-Jabbār, *al-Mughnī*, 11/119.
82 Saleh, *The Problem of Evil in Islamic Theology: A Study on the Concept of al-Qabīh in al-Qadi 'Abd al-Hamadhani's Thought*, 99.
83 Türker, "İlâhî Fiillerin Nedenliliği Sorunu: Gazzâlî'nin Meseleye Yaklaşımı ve Katkısı", 1.
84 al-Qāḍī 'Abd al-Jabbār, *al-Mughnī*, 6-1/57-58.
85 al-Qāḍī 'Abd al-Jabbār, *al-Mughnī*, 11/92.
86 al-Qāḍī 'Abd al-Jabbār, *al-Mughnī*, 2/180.

the moral value of an action, represents a perspective warranting reconsideration.[87] In this context, Qāḍī's notion that ʿilla (cause) does not entail necessity represents a key perspective for this study, particularly given Sterba's position, which obliges God to prevent moral acts that would result in horrendous evil.

According to Qāḍī, the cause or determining factor is not the action itself but rather a particular aspect (wajh) of its realization. In this context, the concept of wajh underscores the importance of context in determining the moral value of an action.[88] For instance, an action that causes pain is considered bad if it is realized under one of two aspects, namely, through injustice or futility.[89] Qāḍī's approach offers an alternative to Sterba's claim that horrendous evils cannot be remedied by God. This is because Qāḍī's wajh-based explanation considers not only the apparent outcomes of moral actions but also their contextual dimensions. Within this framework, it is possible to argue that certain actions, though seemingly painful or harmful, may be meaningful and rationally justifiable from a particular wajh. This offers a potential interpretive avenue that challenges Sterba's assertion that the horrendous evils he cites are absolute evils that always necessitate divine moral intervention.

Qāḍī's conception of morality and his theory of wajh provide a rational foundation for moral actions while simultaneously acknowledging the situational conditions in which individuals operate. As a result, human beings are free in their actions, and there exist motivating causes (daʿī) that guide but do not compel them prior to moral decision-making.[90] Qāḍī says:

> "The guiding cause in an action is the agent's possession of knowledge, belief, and opinion. When the knowing subject is aware of the wrongness of an action, it does not summon the agent to act; rather, it recognizes that such an action is unnecessary."[91]

In this regard, Qāḍī's understanding of moral responsibility, grounded in human free will, diverges significantly from Sterba's view that God's failure to prevent moral evils is morally problematic. For Qāḍī, God assigns responsibility to human beings by sending sufficient incentives to choose what is right. Hence, the existence of evil can be explained in a manner that does not conflict with divine justice.

Sterba's criticism of God for failing to prevent horrendous suffering caused by moral evil is based on his evaluation of suffering as a purely negative phenomenon. Qāḍī fundamentally rejects the notion that suffering is inherently and exclusively evil. According to him, there are different kinds of pain, and he classifies the harmful types into two categories: those that are intrinsically evil, and those in which the absence of any good prevents the transformation of evil into good.[92] Contrary to Sterba's claim, Qāḍī argues that God inflicts pain either for a beneficial purpose or as a deserved punishment in order to avert greater harm. Pain that serves a purpose act as a warning or a lesson that prompts reflection on its underlying causes.[93] For Qāḍī, pain is considered evil only when it serves no purpose, prevents no greater harm, and is undeserved, in other words, when it is entirely devoid of good.[94] However, if pain results in benefit, averts a greater harm, or is deserved, it is not to be deemed evil. Unlike Qāḍī, Sterba views the phenomenon of pain as absolutely evil.[95] Therefore, while Sterba accuses God of moral failure for not preventing evil, Qāḍī maintains that pain is not intrinsically evil and that some forms of suffering may be grounded in benefit, expediency, or deservedness. This allows Qāḍī to morally justify divine action and to offer a unique conception of divine justice in response to Sterba's argument.

Conclusion

This article examines James Sterba's argument concerning divine action and inaction in response to the problem of moral evil, within the thought of Qāḍī ʿAbd al-Jabbār's rational theology in the Islamic theological tradition. Sterba's approach, which assesses divine moral responsibility through the lens of human ethical standards, commits a category mistake by failing to account for the ontological and epistemological distinctions between God and human beings. In classical theism, God is conceived as a transcendent, omnipotent, and morally perfect being whose actions cannot be directly measured by human moral criteria. This indicates that the flaw in Sterba's argument lies not merely in reducing God to human level, but also in detaching the concept of morality from its metaphysical context. Accordingly, this

87 Görgün, "Hüsün-Kubuh Meselesi: Kadı Abdülcebbar'ın Yaklaşım Şeklinin Tahlilî Bir Tasviri veya Toplumsal Varlığı Sürdürmenin Ma'kul Yolları Üzerine Bir Araştırma", 69.
88 Shihadeh, "Theories of Ethical Value in Kalām: A New Interpretation", 392.
89 al-Qāḍī 'Abd al-Jabbār, *al-Mughnī*, 6-1/70, 77.
90 al-Qāḍī 'Abd al-Jabbār, *al-Mughnī*, 6-1/188; Mahsum Aytepe, *İlahi Yardım ve Özgürlük Diyalektiği: Mu'tezile'nin Lütuf Teorisi* (İstanbul: Endülüs, 2018), 79-80.
91 al-Qāḍī 'Abd al-Jabbār, *al-Mughnī*, 6-1/188.
92 al-Qāḍī 'Abd al-Jabbār, *al-Mughnī*, 13/279.
93 al-Qāḍī 'Abd al-Jabbār, *al-Mughnī*, 405.
94 al-Qāḍī 'Abd al-Jabbār, *al-Mughnī*, 13/301.
95 See Sterba, *Is a Good God Logically Possible?*, 15, 18, 37, 40.

article represents an attempt to examine the relationship between God and morality not through the lens of secular ethics, but within the framework of morality's metaphysical foundations.

Qāḍī articulates a rational thought grounded in the belief that God acts in accordance with the principles of justice and wisdom. This framework is not limited to scriptural revelation but is also informed by the rational intelligibility of human nature and the cosmic order. Within this paradigm, Qāḍī argues that God is not the creator of evil and explains the existence of evil by attributing it to underlying purposes such as benefit, grace, and moral necessity, rather than to human epistemological deficiency, thereby clarifying the distinction between appearance and reality. His approach allows for an evaluation of the epistemic and conceptual limits of James Sterba's argument, which is based primarily on empirical observation and consequentialism, and demonstrates that Islamic theology offers a rational and tradition-consistent solution to the problem of evil. Moreover, Qāḍī's ethical theory accounts not only for divine action but also for human moral agency within the parameters of free will, capacity, and the natural conditions of human life. Formulated in the late 10th and early 11th centuries, this model reflects a rationalist orientation that emphasizes human autonomy while preserving divine transcendence. In this context, Qāḍī's perspective on divine action, namely, that God does not commit evil acts, that divine actions are fundamentally distinct from human actions, and that the attributes of God do not carry the same meaning as those of humans, has been directly invoked by several contemporary philosophers in critique of Sterba's argument. This demonstrates that Qāḍī has established an intellectual model regarding divine action whose relevance and applicability persist in contemporary philosophical discourse. Ultimately, Qāḍī presents a balanced moral framework in which human responsibility coexists with divine absoluteness, whereas Sterba's approach, by extrapolating divine responsibility from the consequences of human actions, fails to account for God's metaphysical transcendence.

In conclusion, Qāḍī makes an important intellectual and rational contribution to contemporary debates on the problem of evil and serves as an example of the explanatory role of Islamic theological thought today. His subtle views establish a conceptual bridge between classical kalām and modern philosophical discourse. In this context, his moral theory offers a compelling alternative to James Sterba's critique of the rational and ethical consistency of theistic belief, thereby reaffirming the validity of a theistic moral framework grounded in reason, justice, and human responsibility.

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