

The Problem of Evil: A Study of Alvin Plantinga's Free Will Defense

Nur Hadi Ihsan^{1*}, Muhammad Kholid Muslih², Zalfaa' 'Afaaf Zhoofiroh³, Alfiyya Zahra Asso⁴, Najib Abdussalam⁵

^{1,2,3,4} Universitas Darussalam Gontor, Ponorogo, Indonesia.

⁵ Karabuk University, Turkiye.

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Abstract: This article examines the problem of evil by critically analyzing Alvin Plantinga's Free Will Defense (FWD) and its dialogue with Islamic theology. Employing conceptual analysis and comparative theology, the study investigates Plantinga's notions of libertarian freedom, transworld depravity, and the distinction between moral and natural evil. It compares them with the Ash'arite doctrine of *kasb*, Māturīdī conceptions of human agency, al-Ghazālī's understanding of divine wisdom, and Ibn Taymiyyah's teleological perspective. The study finds that Plantinga's Free Will Defense successfully neutralizes the logical problem of evil by demonstrating the logical compatibility between God and evil. However, it does not adequately address the evidential problem of evil and struggles to explain natural evil. Islamic theological perspectives broaden the discussion by emphasizing divine wisdom, moral responsibility, and metaphysical purpose. The study concludes that the problem of evil is not merely a question of logical consistency but also one of meaning and intelligibility, thereby opening a constructive dialogue between analytic philosophy of religion and Islamic *kalām*.

Keywords: *Problem of Evil, Free Will Defense, Islamic Theology, Alvin Plantinga, Theodicy.*

*Corresponding Author: Nur Hadi Ihsan, (nurhadiihsan@unida.gontor.ac.id), Universitas Darussalam Gontor.

Abstrak: Artikel ini mengkaji masalah kejahatan melalui analisis kritis terhadap *Free Will Defense* (FWD) Alvin Plantinga dan dialognya dengan teologi Islam. Dengan menggunakan analisis konseptual dan pendekatan teologi komparatif, penelitian ini menelaah konsep kebebasan libertarian, *transworld depravity*, serta perbedaan antara kejahatan moral dan kejahatan alamiah dalam pemikiran Plantinga, kemudian membandingkannya dengan doktrin *kasb* al-Asy'ariyah, pandangan Maturidiyah tentang agensi manusia, konsep hikmah ilahi al-Ghazālī, dan perspektif teleologis Ibn Taymiyyah. Penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa *Free Will Defense* berhasil menggugurkan masalah logis kejahatan dengan memperlihatkan bahwa keberadaan Tuhan dan kejahatan secara logis dapat dipertahankan secara bersamaan. Namun, argumen tersebut belum memadai untuk menjawab masalah evidensial kejahatan dan masih menghadapi kesulitan dalam menjelaskan kejahatan alamiah. Perspektif teologi Islam memperluas pembahasan dengan menekankan hikmah ilahi, tanggung jawab moral, dan tujuan metafisis. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa masalah kejahatan tidak hanya menyangkut konsistensi logis, tetapi juga makna dan keterpahaman eksistensi, sehingga membuka ruang dialog yang konstruktif antara filsafat analitik agama dan kalam Islam.

Kata Kunci: Masalah Kejahatan, *Free Will Defense*, Alvin Plantinga, Teologi Islam, *Teodise*.

Introduction

The problem of evil remains one of the most enduring and formidable challenges in the philosophy of religion. Throughout the history of theological and philosophical inquiry, the existence of evil and suffering has continuously raised profound questions regarding the rational coherence of belief in an omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent God. The issue becomes particularly acute within classical monotheistic traditions, where divine perfection is regarded as an essential attribute of God. If God possesses unlimited power, complete knowledge, and perfect goodness, the persistence of moral wrongdoing, natural disasters, disease, and seemingly gratuitous suffering appears difficult to reconcile with such divine attributes. Consequently, the problem of evil has occupied a central position in debates concerning the rationality of theism and the legitimacy of religious belief.¹

The classical formulation of the problem is commonly associated with the so-called "inconsistent triad," often traced to Epicurean thought and later reformulated in modern philosophy by J. L. Mackie. According to this argument,

¹ Bruce Reichenbach and David Basinger, *Reason & Religious Belief: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion*, Fifth Edit, ed. David. Peterson, Michael. Hasker, William. Reichenbach, Bruch. Basinger (Oxford University Press, 2013), 163–65.

the propositions that God is omnipotent, God is wholly good, and evil exists cannot all be true simultaneously without contradiction. Mackie contends that if God possesses both unlimited power and perfect goodness, then evil should not exist. Since evil undeniably exists, the traditional conception of God appears logically inconsistent.² This formulation became one of the most influential atheological arguments of the twentieth century because it sought not merely to challenge particular religious doctrines but to undermine the logical coherence of classical theism itself.³

The philosophical debate concerning evil, however, extends beyond the deductive framework of logical incompatibility. During the latter half of the twentieth century, philosophers increasingly shifted their attention from the logical problem of evil to what became known as the evidential problem of evil. Unlike Mackie's argument, which claims a direct contradiction between God and evil, the evidential approach argues that the magnitude, intensity, and apparent pointlessness of suffering constitute strong evidence against the existence of God. William L. Rowe's influential discussion of gratuitous suffering illustrates this development. Rowe argues that certain forms of suffering appear to serve no greater moral, spiritual, or providential purpose and therefore diminish the probability that a perfectly good and all-powerful deity exists.⁴ As a result, contemporary discussions of evil have come to distinguish carefully between logical challenges to theism and probabilistic or evidential challenges.⁵

Within this intellectual context, Alvin Plantinga developed what is widely regarded as the most significant contemporary response to the logical problem of evil: the Free Will Defense (FWD). Rather than attempting to explain God's actual reasons for permitting evil, Plantinga pursues a more modest but philosophically strategic objective. His aim is not to construct a comprehensive theodicy but to demonstrate that the coexistence of God and evil is logically possible. Drawing upon modal logic, possible-world semantics, and a libertarian

² J. L. Mackie, "Evil and Omnipotence," *Journey into Philosophy: An Introduction with Classic and Contemporary Readings* 64, no. 254 (n.d.): 200–212, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvpj7gm2.11>.

³ Mackie, "Evil and Omnipotence," 203–5. See Daniel. Howard-Snyder, *The Evidential Argument From Evil*, ed. General Editor Merold Westphal (Indiana University Press, 1996), 3–4.

⁴ William L. Rowe, "The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 16, no. 4 (2010): 335–41.

⁵ Alvin Plantinga, "The Probabilistic Argument from Evil," *Philosophical Studies* 35 (1979): 1.

conception of freedom, Plantinga argues that God may have morally sufficient reasons for creating free creatures even when such freedom entails the possibility of moral evil.⁶ If the existence of free moral agents is a great good that cannot be achieved without the possibility of wrongdoing, then the existence of evil does not logically contradict the existence of an omnipotent and benevolent God.⁷

Plantinga's contribution fundamentally altered the landscape of contemporary philosophy of religion. Many philosophers, including some who remain unconvinced by theism, acknowledge that the Free Will Defense significantly weakened the force of the logical problem of evil. By introducing concepts such as significant freedom and transworld depravity, Plantinga demonstrated that the alleged contradiction between God and evil cannot simply be assumed.⁸ Nevertheless, the success of his defense remains a subject of continuing debate. Critics have questioned whether transworld depravity is philosophically plausible, whether libertarian freedom is necessary for moral responsibility, and whether Plantinga's framework can adequately address natural evil. More importantly, many scholars argue that even if the Free Will Defense successfully neutralizes the logical problem, it leaves the evidential problem of evil largely unresolved.⁹

Despite the extensive literature devoted to Plantinga's thought, most studies have examined the Free Will Defense within the framework of Western analytic philosophy and Christian theology. Comparatively little attention has been given to its possible relationship with classical Islamic theological discussions concerning divine justice, human agency, and the wisdom underlying suffering. However, questions concerning evil, freedom, and divine providence have long occupied a central position in Islamic intellectual history. Muslim theologians developed sophisticated responses to these issues centuries before the emergence of contemporary analytic philosophy. Theological schools such as the *Ash'ariyyah* and the *Maturidiyyah* engaged extensively with the relationship between divine omnipotence and human responsibility. In contrast, major thinkers such as Abu Hamid al-Ghazālī explored the metaphysical and

⁶ Alvin Plantinga and William B. Eerdmans, *God, Freedom, and Evil*, in *Ophelia* (Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data, 2002), 29.

⁷ Alvin Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity* (Clarendon Press, 1974), 165–84.

⁸ Reichenbach and Basinger, *Reason & Religious Belief: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion*, 163–65.

⁹ Rowe, "The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism," 335–41.

spiritual significance of suffering within the framework of divine wisdom (*ḥikmah*).¹⁰

From an Islamic theological perspective, the problem of evil is not merely a question of logical consistency but also a question of metaphysical meaning and divine purpose. While Plantinga seeks to establish the logical possibility of God's coexistence with evil, al-Ghazālī's thought directs attention to the wisdom embedded in creation and to the limitations of human understanding in comprehending divine purposes. Similarly, the Ash'arite doctrine of *kasb* offers a distinctive account of human responsibility that differs substantially from Plantinga's libertarian conception of freedom while nevertheless preserving moral accountability.¹¹ These differences reveal important philosophical and theological questions regarding the nature of freedom, causality, divine action, and moral responsibility.

Although a growing body of scholarship has explored either Plantinga's Free Will Defense or Islamic approaches to theodicy, comparative studies integrating these two intellectual traditions remain relatively limited, particularly within contemporary Indonesian academic discourse. Existing research frequently treats analytic philosophy of religion and Islamic theology as separate fields of inquiry, thereby overlooking the possibility of productive dialogue between them. Consequently, an important gap remains in understanding how contemporary philosophical defenses of theism may be evaluated, enriched, or challenged through engagement with classical Islamic theological perspectives.

This article seeks to address that gap by critically examining the philosophical coherence of Alvin Plantinga's Free Will Defense and evaluating its relevance from the perspective of Islamic theology, particularly the Ash'arite doctrine of *kasb* and al-Ghazālī's conception of divine wisdom. Through conceptual analysis and comparative theological inquiry, this study aims to assess both the strengths and limitations of Plantinga's response to the logical problem of evil while exploring points of convergence and divergence between analytic philosophy of religion and Islamic *kalām*. By bringing these two

¹⁰ Eric Linn Ormsby, *Theodicy in Islamic Thought: The Dispute Over Al-Ghazali's Best of All Possible Worlds* (Princeton University Press, 1984), 16–18.

¹¹ Ormsby, *Theodicy in Islamic Thought: The Dispute Over Al-Ghazali's Best of All Possible Worlds*, 16–18.

traditions into conversation, the article contributes not only to contemporary discussions of the problem of evil but also to broader efforts to develop meaningful intellectual engagement between modern analytic philosophy and classical Islamic thought.

The Problem of Evil in Philosophy of Religion

The problem of evil constitutes one of the most enduring and structurally central challenges in the philosophy of religion. It arises from a *prima facie* tension between three propositions: the existence of an omnipotent God, the existence of an omnibenevolent God, and the reality of evil in the world. While classical theistic traditions have long affirmed the coherence of divine attributes with worldly suffering, modern analytic philosophy has sharpened the logical structure of the objection in ways that demand more precise responses. The problem of evil is therefore not merely an emotional or existential challenge, but a rigorous philosophical argument that interrogates the internal consistency of theism as a rational worldview.

1. The Logical Problem of Evil

The logical formulation of the problem of evil is most famously associated with Epicurean reflections and later reformulated in contemporary analytic philosophy by J. L. Mackie. The core claim is that the coexistence of God, understood as omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent, with any evil whatsoever is logically inconsistent. Mackie argues that if God is both willing and able to eliminate evil, then evil should not exist; yet since evil clearly exists, at least one of the classical divine attributes must be rejected or revised.¹²

This formulation assumes a strong deductive incompatibility between God and evil. In its strictest form, the argument suggests not merely that the existence of evil is improbable given theism, but that it is logically impossible. The force of this argument depends heavily on implicit assumptions about divine intentions, moral perfection, and the necessity of preventing all forms of suffering.

However, the logical problem of evil has been significantly weakened in contemporary philosophy through the development of modal logic and

¹² Mackie, "Evil and Omnipotence," 200–212.

the introduction of theistic defenses. The most influential response is Alvin Plantinga's Free Will Defense, which argues that the existence of God and the existence of evil are logically compatible if it is possible that God created creatures with significant moral freedom who could choose evil.¹³ This shift from necessity to possibility undermines the strict deductive claim of inconsistency.

2. The Evidential Problem of Evil

While the logical version has largely been considered defused, the evidential problem of evil remains a central concern in contemporary philosophy of religion. Unlike the logical version, the evidential argument does not claim inconsistency but rather improbability. William Rowe's influential formulation argues that the existence of seemingly pointless or gratuitous suffering provides strong evidence against the existence of a perfectly good and all-powerful deity.¹⁴

Rowe's famous example of a fawn suffering in a forest fire—suffering that appears to serve no greater moral or redemptive purpose—illustrates the intuition that any greater good does not obviously justify much suffering in the world. This leads to a probabilistic argument: if such instances of apparently pointless evil exist, then it is more reasonable to believe that an all-good, all-powerful God does not exist.

Paul Draper further refines this argument through an evolutionary-naturalistic framework, suggesting that the distribution of pleasure and pain in the world is more expected under naturalism than under theism.¹⁵ On this view, natural selection and indifferent physical processes better account for the observed structure of suffering than intentional divine governance.

Thus, the evidential problem of evil shifts the debate from logical consistency to explanatory adequacy. It challenges not whether God and evil can coexist, but whether their coexistence is epistemically plausible given the world's empirical features.

¹³ Plantinga and Eerdman, *God, Freedom, and Evil*, 30–33.

¹⁴ Rowe, "The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism," 335–41.

¹⁵ Paul Draper, *Pain and Pleasure: An Evidential Problem for Theists*, 23, no. 3 (1989): 331–50.

3. Defense and Theodicy: Conceptual Distinction

A crucial conceptual distinction in this discourse is between "defense" and "theodicy." A defense aims to show that the existence of God and evil is logically possible, without necessarily providing the actual reason God permits evil. Plantinga's Free Will Defense is a paradigmatic example of this strategy. It does not claim to know God's actual reasons but only that there is a possible world in which God and evil coexist without contradiction.

A theodicy, by contrast, seeks to provide a positive explanatory account of why God permits evil. It attempts to justify divine action in moral terms, often appealing to soul-making, moral development, or eschatological compensation. John Hick's "soul-making theodicy," for example, argues that suffering serves as a necessary condition for the development of moral and spiritual maturity.¹⁶

The distinction is methodologically significant. Defenses operate at the level of logical possibility, while theodicies operate at the level of explanatory truth-claims. Much of contemporary debate hinges on whether theism requires only logical coherence or a stronger explanatory justification.

4. Hume, Hick, and the Modern Expansion of the Debate

David Hume's critique in *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* remains foundational in framing the philosophical skepticism toward divine providence. Hume questions whether the empirical world genuinely supports the inference to a morally perfect designer, especially given the prevalence of suffering and disorder.¹⁷ His argument anticipates later evidential formulations by emphasizing inductive reasoning rather than deductive contradiction.

In contrast, John Hick's development of Irenaean theodicy reorients the discussion toward teleology. Hick rejects the notion that humans were created in a perfected state, instead proposing that moral and spiritual growth requires an "epistemic distance" from God. In this framework, evil is

¹⁶ John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, in *Palgrave Macmillan*, ed. A.C. McGill et al. (palgrave macmillan, 2010), 12–13.

¹⁷ David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, ed. Henry D. Aiken (Hafner Library of Classics, 1948), 61–71.

not a metaphysical flaw but a necessary condition for genuine moral agency and development.

This move significantly reshapes the discourse by reframing evil not as an anomaly to be eliminated but as an instrument within a broader developmental structure of creation.

5. Transition to Plantinga and the Modal Turn

The philosophical landscape of the problem of evil undergoes a decisive shift with Alvin Plantinga's introduction of modal logic and possible worlds semantics. Plantinga's strategy does not attempt to explain evil but to demonstrate that no formal contradiction exists between the existence of God and the existence of evil.

Central to this approach is the concept of libertarian free will, according to which moral agents possess genuine alternative possibilities in their actions. If such freedom is logically valuable, then it follows that God could not determine creatures to always choose good without undermining their freedom. Consequently, the possibility of moral evil becomes a necessary condition for significant moral freedom.

This modal turn redefines the debate: instead of asking whether God and evil coexist in actuality, the question becomes whether there is any possible world in which their coexistence is logically coherent. Plantinga's argument effectively shifts the burden of proof onto the critic, requiring the critic to demonstrate impossibility rather than improbability.

The problem of evil, in its various formulations, presents a layered philosophical challenge that progresses from logical deduction to probabilistic inference and, finally, to modal analysis. The logical problem, largely addressed by Plantinga's defense, has given way to evidential concerns that focus on the distribution and intensity of suffering in the world. Meanwhile, the distinction between defense and theodicy clarifies the methodological boundaries of the discourse, separating logical compatibility from explanatory justification.

This section has shown that contemporary philosophy of religion does not treat the problem of evil as a single argument but as a family of interrelated challenges. These challenges set the stage for Plantinga's Free

Will Defense, which will be critically examined in the following section, particularly regarding its metaphysical assumptions and its adequacy in addressing both moral and natural evil.

Plantinga's Free Will Defense

Alvin Plantinga's Free Will Defense represents one of the most influential contemporary responses to the logical problem of evil. Rather than attempting to provide a full theodicy that explains why God permits evil, Plantinga's strategy is fundamentally defensive and modal in nature. His central aim is modest but philosophically decisive: to demonstrate that the existence of God and the existence of evil are logically compatible. This shift from explanation to possibility marks a turning point in modern philosophy of religion, repositioning the debate within the framework of possible worlds semantics and modal logic.

1. Libertarian Freedom and Moral Responsibility

At the core of Plantinga's argument lies the concept of libertarian free will. According to this view, a free action is not causally determined by prior conditions, including divine determination. Instead, moral agents possess the genuine ability to choose between alternative possibilities. This robust notion of freedom is considered necessary for moral responsibility: without the capacity to choose otherwise, moral praise or blame would lose its normative grounding.

Plantinga argues that a world containing significantly free creatures is more valuable than a world of automatons who always do good. However, the logical consequence of such freedom is the possibility of moral evil. If God creates beings with libertarian freedom, then God cannot causally determine that they always choose good without undermining that very freedom. Thus, the existence of moral evil becomes a logically permissible outcome of a greater good: the existence of free moral agents.¹⁸

This line of reasoning does not assert that humans in fact use their freedom responsibly; rather, it claims that the existence of free will is sufficient to render moral evil logically possible within a theistic framework.

¹⁸ Plantinga and Eerdmans, *God, Freedom, and Evil*, 30–33.

2. Possible Worlds and Modal Strategy

Plantinga's argument is formally grounded in modal logic and the semantics of possible worlds. He proposes that to show the logical compatibility of God and evil, it is sufficient to demonstrate that there exists at least one possible world in which God, omnipotence, omnibenevolence, and evil coexist without contradiction.

In this framework, the existence of evil is not treated as an absolute logical disproof of God but as a feature that may be instantiated in some possible worlds but not others. The key question becomes whether there is any logically coherent world in which God creates free creatures who sometimes choose evil.

Plantinga's answer is affirmative. He introduces the concept of transworld depravity, the idea that in any possible world in which significantly free creatures exist, they would at least sometimes freely choose evil. If transworld depravity is even possibly true, then it follows that God could not actualize a world containing free creatures who always choose good.¹⁹ Thus, the logical tension between God and evil dissolves under modal analysis: the existence of evil becomes compatible with divine perfection if freedom is logically prioritized.

3. Transworld Depravity and Its Philosophical Burden

Despite its ingenuity, the notion of transworld depravity has been subject to significant philosophical scrutiny. Critics argue that Plantinga's defense relies heavily on a highly specific and arguably speculative modal assumption: that every possible creaturely essence suffers from moral failure in all feasible worlds where it is instantiated.

J. L. Mackie, although primarily addressing the earlier logical formulation, would likely regard such a move as an ad hoc metaphysical escape rather than a genuine resolution. The concern is that transworld

¹⁹ Alvin Plantinga, *Transworld Depravity, Transworld Sanctity, and Free Will Defense* (Oxford University Press, 1974).

depravity is not independently motivated but introduced precisely to preserve the coherence of theism.²⁰

Furthermore, some philosophers question whether the concept of transworld depravity is coherent at all. If God is omnipotent, it is argued, it seems conceivable that He could actualize a world in which free creatures always choose good freely. Plantinga responds by insisting that logical possibility is constrained not by divine omnipotence alone but by the internal structure of freedom itself. If it is logically impossible for free agents to always choose good in every possible world, then even omnipotence cannot actualize such a world without contradiction. This leads to a deeper metaphysical dispute regarding the nature of freedom, necessity, and divine creative power.

4. The Problem of Natural Evil

One of the most persistent criticisms of Plantinga's Free Will Defense concerns its limited scope. While the argument is primarily directed at moral evil—evil resulting from human actions—it does not straightforwardly account for natural evil, such as earthquakes, diseases, and natural disasters.

William Rowe famously argues that even if moral evil could be justified by appeal to free will, there remains a vast domain of apparently pointless suffering in nature that cannot plausibly be attributed to human agency. The fawn suffering in a forest fire remains a paradigmatic example of suffering that appears independent of moral choice and thus resistant to explanations in terms of free will.²¹

Plantinga acknowledges this challenge and proposes speculative extensions, such as the possibility of non-human free agents (e.g., fallen angels) responsible for natural evil. However, many philosophers regard this move as increasingly metaphysical and lacking independent plausibility. It risks transforming a philosophical defense into a highly speculative cosmology.

²⁰ Mackie, "Evil and Omnipotence," 200–212. See Robert C. Solomon and Kathleem M. Hinggis, *The Big Question: A Short Introduction to Philosophy*, 9th ed., ed. Joann Kozyrev (Clark Baxter, 2014), 83.

²¹ Rowe, "The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism," 335–41.

Paul Draper strengthens this objection by arguing that the distribution of natural suffering appears epistemically more probable under naturalistic evolution than under theism. If natural processes operate without moral intention, then the presence of indifferent suffering is expected; if a perfectly good deity governs the world, such suffering becomes less expected.²²

5. Evidential Critiques: Rowe, Draper, and Oppy

The evidential critique of Plantinga does not deny logical compatibility but questions explanatory adequacy. William Rowe's formulation emphasizes instances of apparently gratuitous suffering—events that seem to serve no greater moral or developmental purpose. The strength of Rowe's argument lies in its intuitive appeal: even if some evil can be justified, it is not clear that all observed suffering is necessary for a higher good.

Paul Draper's probabilistic argument further shifts the debate toward comparative explanatory frameworks. He argues that naturalism provides a simpler and more unified explanation of suffering than theism, which must introduce additional auxiliary hypotheses (such as soul-making or hidden divine purposes) to account for the same data.

Graham Oppy extends this critique by challenging the overall dialectical effectiveness of Plantinga's defense. Oppy argues that even if Plantinga successfully neutralizes the logical problem, the cumulative weight of evidential considerations still renders theism less plausible than competing naturalistic explanations.²³

Thus, the contemporary debate increasingly centers not on logical consistency but on comparative plausibility across worldviews.

6. Critical Assessment of Plantinga's Strategy

Plantinga's Free Will Defense is widely regarded as a decisive refutation of the strict logical problem of evil. Most contemporary philosophers of religion accept that he has successfully shown that there is

²² Paul Draper, *Pain and Pleasure: An Evidential Problem for Theists*, 331–50.

²³ Graham Oppy, *Arguing About Gods* (Cambridge University Press, 2006).

no formal contradiction between God and evil. However, this success comes at a cost: it leaves the evidential problem largely untouched.

The strength of Plantinga's argument lies in its methodological precision. By restricting his claim to logical possibility, he avoids the burden of providing a full moral explanation of evil. However, this very restriction also limits its theological ambition. The defense does not tell us why evil exists; it only tells us that its existence is not logically inconsistent with theism.

Consequently, the Free Will Defense functions more as a boundary-setting argument than as a comprehensive solution. It delineates the space within which theistic belief remains logically coherent but does not settle the question of whether that belief is empirically or probabilistically justified.

7. Transition to Theological Engagement

The limitations of Plantinga's model open the way to engagement with broader theological traditions that seek to integrate the metaphysical, ethical, and spiritual dimensions of evil. In particular, Islamic theological responses—such as those found in Ash‘arī occasionalism, Māturīdī accounts of human acquisition (*kasb*), and the ethical-mystical perspectives of al-Ghazālī—offer alternative conceptualizations of divine agency and human responsibility.

These traditions do not operate within the same modal-logical framework as Plantinga but instead approach the problem of evil through a synthesis of metaphysics, ethics, and teleology. The following section will therefore explore how Islamic theological systems both converge with and diverge from the assumptions underlying the Free Will Defense, particularly regarding divine wisdom (*ḥikmah*), moral agency, and the structure of reality.

Dialectic with Islamic Theology

The discussion of evil within Islamic theology does not arise as a direct counterpart to the modern analytic formulation of the problem of evil. However, it engages many of the same underlying tensions: divine omnipotence, moral responsibility, and the presence of suffering in the created order. Unlike the

predominantly logical and modal framing found in contemporary philosophy of religion, Islamic theological discourse approaches the issue through a synthesis of revelation (*wahy*), rational reflection (*'aql*), and spiritual insight (*dhawq*). Within this triadic framework, evil is not merely a logical anomaly, but a metaphysical and ethical phenomenon embedded within divine wisdom (*ḥikmah*).

This section develops a comparative dialectic between Plantinga's Free Will Defense and major Islamic theological traditions, particularly Ash'arism, Māturīdism, and the ethical-spiritual reflections of al-Ghazālī and Ibn Taymiyyah. The aim is not to reduce one system to another but to highlight structural convergences and irreducible divergences in their conceptualizations of divine agency and human freedom.

1. Ash'arī Theology: Divine Omnipotence and the Doctrine of *Kasb*

In Ash'arī theology, represented prominently by Abū al-Ḥasan al-Ash'arī and later systematized by theologians such as al-Bāqillānī and al-Juwaynī, divine omnipotence is understood in strongly occasionalist terms. God is the sole efficient cause of all events in the universe, and no created entity possesses independent causal power. Every act, whether deemed good or evil, is ultimately created by God.

However, to preserve moral responsibility, Ash'arī theology introduces the doctrine of *kasb* (acquisition). According to this view, human beings "acquire" actions created by God, thereby becoming morally accountable without possessing independent creative power.²⁴ This conceptualization preserves divine absolute sovereignty while maintaining ethical responsibility.

When compared to Plantinga's Free Will Defense, a striking divergence emerges. Plantinga locates moral evil in the realm of libertarian freedom, which presupposes genuine alternative possibilities independent of divine determination. Ash'arism, by contrast, denies such independence in causal terms. However, both frameworks attempt to safeguard divine omnipotence while preserving moral accountability.

²⁴ Abū al-Ḥasan al-Ash'arī, *Maqālāt Al-Islāmiyyīn* (Maṭba'at al-Dawlah, 1929); Abū Bakr Muḥammad ibn aṭ-Ṭayyib al-Bāqillānī, *Kitāb Al-Tamhīd*. (1957).

The key difference lies in metaphysical structure: Plantinga's model is modal and counterfactual, whereas Ash'arism is actualist and occasionalist. In the latter, the coherence of evil is not explained by creaturely freedom but by divine wisdom that transcends human comprehension.

2. Māturīdī Thought: A Nuanced Account of Human Agency

The Māturīdī school, associated with Abū Manṣūr al-Māturīdī, offers a more robust account of human agency compared to Ash'arism. While still affirming the divine creation of all acts, Māturīdī theology grants human beings greater functional autonomy through a doctrine closer to partial free will.²⁵

Human beings, in this framework, possess a real capacity (*istiṭā'a*) that enables them to choose among alternatives, although God creates this capacity. This allows for a more balanced account of moral responsibility, one that neither compromises divine sovereignty nor reduces human agency to mere acquisition.

In relation to Plantinga, Māturīdī's thought occupies an intermediate position. It affirms meaningful choice but does not commit to libertarian freedom in the strict modal sense. Thus, while Plantinga's argument depends on the metaphysical possibility of alternative worlds shaped by free agents, Māturīdī theology emphasizes actual-world responsibility grounded in divinely enabled capacity rather than independent causal autonomy. This difference reveals a deeper methodological contrast: Plantinga operates within analytic modal metaphysics, whereas Māturīdī theology operates within a theocentric metaphysical realism in which all capacities are ultimately grounded in divine will.

3. Al-Ghazālī: Divine Wisdom and Epistemic Limitation

Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī introduces a profoundly epistemological dimension to the problem of evil. In works such as *Iḥyā' Ulūm al-Dīn* and *al-Maqṣad al-Asnā*, al-Ghazālī emphasizes that divine actions are governed by absolute wisdom (*ḥikmah*), which may not be fully accessible to human

²⁵ Abū Manṣūr al-Māturīdī, *Kitāb Al-Tawḥīd* (Dar el-Machreq, 1970).

cognition²⁶. From this perspective, what appears evil may, in fact, be part of a hidden structure of goodness that exceeds human understanding. Suffering, loss, and affliction are thus reinterpreted as instruments of spiritual purification, moral refinement, or eschatological elevation.

Unlike Plantinga, who restricts his argument to logical compatibility, al-Ghazālī introduces a strong epistemic humility: human beings are not in a position to judge the ultimate value of divine acts. This shifts the discourse from logical justification to existential submission (*taslīm*).

However, a critical tension arises. While Plantinga's defense preserves rational defensibility of theism, al-Ghazālī's approach risks dissolving the demand for explanation altogether into a framework of trust in divine wisdom. Critics may argue that this move reduces philosophical inquiry into theological affirmation, whereas defenders see it as a recognition of the limits of finite reason.

4. Ibn Taymiyyah: Teleology of Creation and Moral Order

Ibn Taymiyyah offers another significant perspective by emphasizing the teleological structure of creation. In his theological writings, he argues that everything God creates contains wisdom and purpose, even if that purpose is not immediately evident to human observers. Evil, in this sense, is not pure negation but is always embedded within a larger order of divine justice and mercy.²⁷

Importantly, Ibn Taymiyyah rejects the idea that God acts arbitrarily. Divine actions are always connected to wisdom (*ḥikmah*) and justice (*'adl*), even if the specific reasons remain partially concealed. This position allows for a more structured theodicy than al-Ghazālī's epistemic emphasis, while still maintaining transcendence of divine purposes.

Compared with Plantinga's, Ibn Taymiyyah's framework is closer to a substantive theodicy than to a mere defense. Whereas Plantinga refrains from asserting actual divine reasons, Ibn Taymiyyah affirms that reasons grounded in wisdom do exist, even if not fully knowable. This introduces a stronger metaphysical commitment to intelligibility in creation.

²⁶ Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn*, vol. 3 (Dār al-Ma'rifah, n.d.).

²⁷ Ibn Taymiyyah, *Majmū' Al-Fatāwā* (Maktabah ar-Riyadh al-Haditsah, 1967).

5. Systematic Comparison: Modal Logic vs. Theological Metaphysics

When the three Islamic theological approaches are placed in dialogue with Plantinga's Free Will Defense, a fundamental methodological divergence becomes evident. Plantinga operates within a modal-logical framework where the key question is whether a contradiction exists between divine attributes and evil across possible worlds. Islamic theology, by contrast, does not prioritize modal possibility but rather metaphysical actuality grounded in divine will and wisdom.

Ash'arism resolves tension through radical divine sovereignty, Māturīdism through mediated human capacity, and al-Ghazālī and Ibn Taymiyyah through epistemological and teleological frameworks. None of these approaches requires the machinery of possible worlds semantics, yet all attempt to preserve coherence between divine goodness and worldly suffering.²⁸ Thus, while Plantinga dissolves the logical problem by restricting its scope, Islamic theology often reframes the problem itself by relocating it within broader metaphysical and spiritual horizons.

6. Critical Synthesis

The dialogue between Plantinga's Free Will Defense and Islamic theological traditions reveals that the problem of evil is not a single philosophical puzzle, but a plurality of interpretive frameworks shaped by differing metaphysical commitments. Plantinga's contribution lies in clarifying logical space and neutralizing strict contradiction. Islamic theology, however, expands the discourse into questions of meaning, wisdom, and existential orientation. Where Plantinga seeks logical compatibility, Islamic thought often seeks existential intelligibility and spiritual reconciliation.

At the same time, neither framework fully resolves the evidential force of suffering as articulated in contemporary philosophy. The tension between experiential reality and metaphysical explanation remains structurally persistent. This suggests that the problem of evil is not merely an intellectual challenge but also a boundary case for human reason itself.

²⁸ Frank Griffel, *Al-Ghazālī's Philosophical Theology* (Oxford University Press, 2009).

Having examined both the analytic formulation of the problem of evil and its engagement with Islamic theological traditions, the discussion now moves toward a synthesis. The final section will draw together the philosophical and theological insights developed thus far, assess their combined contributions, and outline the implications for contemporary philosophy of religion and comparative theology.

Conclusion

The problem of evil, as it has been developed in contemporary philosophy of religion, reveals itself not as a single argument but as a layered and evolving dialectical structure. Beginning from the classical formulation of logical contradiction, moving through evidential probability, and culminating in modal-logical analysis, the discourse demonstrates a progressive refinement in both its conceptual tools and its epistemic claims.

Plantinga's Free Will Defense represents a decisive turning point in this trajectory. By shifting the discussion from actuality to possibility, and from explanation to logical consistency, Plantinga successfully dismantles the strict logical version of the problem of evil. The existence of God and the existence of evil are shown to be formally compatible within at least one possible world structure. This achievement, however, is deliberately limited in scope. It does not attempt to explain evil, nor does it engage directly with the experiential weight of suffering.

The evidential problem of evil, as developed by Rowe and Draper, reopens the debate at a different level. Here, the issue is no longer a logical contradiction but epistemic probability. The distribution, intensity, and apparent gratuity of suffering raise doubts about the likelihood that theism is the best explanatory hypothesis for the world. This shift exposes a limitation in purely modal responses: logical compatibility does not entail explanatory adequacy.

The engagement with Islamic theology further broadens the conceptual horizon. *Ash'arī* occasionalism re-centers divine omnipotence at the cost of secondary causality, while the doctrine of *kasb* preserves moral responsibility in a non-libertarian form. Māturīdī theology introduces a more balanced account of human capacity, maintaining both divine creation and meaningful agency. Al-Ghazālī's epistemic humility reframes suffering as embedded within divine wisdom that transcends human cognitive access. At the same time, Ibn

Taymiyyah strengthens the teleological dimension of creation by insisting on divine purpose and justice in all acts.

Taken together, these perspectives reveal that the problem of evil is not merely a philosophical puzzle but a point of convergence between metaphysics, ethics, epistemology, and spirituality. Whereas analytic philosophy prioritizes logical structure and modal consistency, Islamic theology integrates ontological hierarchy, moral meaning, and existential orientation.

The comparative analysis thus yields a significant conclusion: Plantinga resolves the problem's logical form, but Islamic theology and evidential critiques together demonstrate that the deeper challenge lies not in logical contradiction but in the interpretation of suffering within a meaningful totality of existence. The problem of evil, therefore, persists not as a formal inconsistency but as an open question concerning the intelligibility of the world under conditions of finite human understanding.

Future research may further explore integrative frameworks that combine modal logic with theological metaphysics or investigate how non-Western philosophical traditions outside Islamic *kalām* address analogous tensions. Such inquiries may enrich the discourse by moving beyond binary oppositions between theism and atheism toward more pluralistic models of metaphysical explanation.[]

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