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God, Ethics, and Evolution: An Islamic Rejoinder to Sterba's Moral Critique

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Abstract

This paper engages with James Sterba's arguments from an Islamic theological perspective, particularly drawing on the Mu'tazilite tradition. It focuses on three central themes: (1) the position of God in the face of horrendous evils, (2) the relationship between divine command theory and moral objectivity, and (3) the compatibility of Darwinian evolution with objective morality. First, I challenge Sterba's claim that the existence of a wholly good and powerful God is logically incompatible with horrendous evils by proposing a "theistic structuralist" framework inspired by the Mu'tazilite scholar Qadi Abd al-Jabbar. Second, while largely agreeing with Sterba's critique of divine command theory, I incorporate a Mu'tazilite view that grounds moral objectivity in God's inherently good nature. Third, I support Sterba's argument—against Sharon Street—that Darwinian evolution does not undermine moral objectivity, but I further argue that a consistent defense of this view ultimately requires the existence of God.

Keywords: problem of evil; Mu'tazila; divine command theory; moral objectivism; evolution; Darwinism; theistic structuralism; Qadi Abd al-Jabbar; James Sterba

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1. Introduction

In his article "An Ethics without God That Is Compatible with Darwinian Evolution" (Sterba 2024), Sterba addresses three central issues. First, he revisits his earlier argument from *Is a Good God Logically Possible?* (Sterba 2019), in which he claims that the existence of an all-good and all-powerful God is logically incompatible with the presence of horrendous evils in the world. Second, he discusses divine command theory—an ethical view linking moral principles to divine commands—in the context of moral objectivism. Third, he argues that Darwinian evolution does not pose an obstacle to the existence of objective morality. As a Muslim theist, I should note at the outset that I find myself in agreement with Sterba on the latter two issues more often than I disagree with him.

In this paper, I will follow the same three central themes addressed by Sterba. The first concerns God's stance in the face of evil. Here, my aim is to respond to Sterba's article "Forty Contributors: A Response" (Sterba 2023) which also includes his reply to my earlier critique of Is a Good God Logically Possible? (Sterba 2019), presented in my article titled "A Modified Free-Will Defense: A Structural and Theistic Free-Will Defense as a Response to James Sterba" (Balci 2022). In doing so, I will revisit the theistic structuralist framework I previously introduced, and further elaborate—drawing on the Mu'tazilite scholar Qadi Abd al-Jabbar (d. 1025, hereafter Abd-al-Jabbar)[1], a major figure of Islamic moral objectivism—on what it means for the human being to be a moral agent, and on the limits of divine intervention in human action. This section will focus on a concept absent in both Sterba's

and broader atheistic arguments from evil, but exemplified at the peak of Islamic rational theology: the human being's moral agency in relation to God. Second, I will turn to Sterba's critique of divine command theory, which he discusses at length. While I will largely agree with his criticisms, I will engage them from the perspective of Islamic philosophical theology—again focusing on the Mu'tazilite tradition—to offer certain qualifications and corrections. Third and finally, I will affirm Sterba's position that Darwinian (or other forms of) evolutionary theory does not undermine objective morality. However, I will argue that a coherent defense of this view ultimately requires a theistic framework.[2]

2. Rejoining to the Sterba's Debate on God and Horrendous Evils

What I aim to do here is to briefly return to Sterba's Is a Good God Logically Possible? (Sterba 2019), and offer a renewed response to his reply to my earlier critique (Balci 2022), which he presented in "Forty Contributors: A Response" (Sterba 2023). To begin, let us recall the three Moral Evil Prevention Requirements (MEPRs I–III), which Sterba develops by expanding on the Pauline Principle—"never to do evil that good may come of it"—as discussed in both his book (Sterba 2019, pp. 151–53) and his more recent article (Sterba 2024, pp. 1–2):

> A: Prevent horrendous evil consequences when one can easily do so without violating anyone's rights and no other goods are at stake.
>
> B: Do not secure a good using morally objectionable means when you can easily secure the same good by using morally unobjectionable means.
>
> C: Do not permit especially horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions to be inflicted on would-be victims when a greater good would result from preventing them.

Sterba argues that these three moral requirements (MEPRs) place a binding ethical obligation on any God who is both omnibenevolent and omnipotent—yet, according to him, God fails to fulfill them (Sterba 2019, see, for example, p. 29). In his view, even Alvin Plantinga's Free Will Defense, which aims to demonstrate the logical possibility of such a God in the presence of horrendous evil, falls short of securing these requirements. This is because, Sterba contends, the Free Will Defense cannot adequately explain why the significant freedom of those who suffer horrendous evils is overridden or destroyed. As he puts it, "God can also promote freedom, in fact, promote far greater significant freedom, by actually interfering with the freedom of some of our free actions at certain times" (Sterba 2019, p. 27). From Sterba's perspective, God could very well have designed a plan of free will in which no individual's significant freedom would be violated. In other words, Sterba believes that God should intervene in every individual case of horrendous evil we observe and prevent its occurrence. If God does not—or cannot—do this, then, logically, such a being cannot be both all-good and all-powerful, as classical theism asserts.

In my article responding to Sterba (Balci 2022), I acknowledged that his critique of Plantinga is justified—specifically because Plantinga does not fully account for the implications of horrendous evils from the perspective of their victims. What renders Plantinga's Free Will Defense incomplete, I argued, is its lack of grounding in a broader metaphysical framework. For this reason, I proposed that Plantinga's argument—or any Free Will Defense, for that matter—must be supplemented by a particular kind of theistic structure. I argued that the most coherent articulation of such a structure can be found in the Islamic tradition, especially in the work of the Mu'tazilite theologian Abd al-Jabbar and his followers. This theistic-metaphysical structure consists of an inseparable nexus between divine justice, human responsibility, and the ontological and metaphysical status of the human being in relation to God. According to this framework, God does not

intervene in individual instances of evil, and the moral rationale for this lies in the mutual moral responsibilities that define the divine-human relationship. From the perspective of Islamic theism, this structural relationship is indispensable to any discussion of free will (Balci 2022, p. 8).

The foundation of this framework is divine justice, which can only be realized in a universe where God refrains from interfering in human actions within a morally significant relationship. Divine justice, in this view, requires that God reward human beings with what they rightly deserve, and—by virtue of divine grace—grant them even more than they deserve, provided this does not violate justice. This principle is developed in Mu'tazilite thought as the theory of *aslah*, which asserts that God is obligated to do "the most appropriate, most useful, and best thing for the human being" (Abd al-Jabbar 2013, vol. 1, p. 216; see also Balci 2022, p. 10).

These obligatory goods include a universe oriented toward the good, a reason inclined to seek the good, the facilitation of good actions in the world, the motivational role of divine revelation in moral epistemology (even if not strictly necessary), a rational moral relationship between God and humanity, human free will and responsibility, and the guarantee of just outcomes for human actions. In my earlier article, I argued that this Mu'tazilite structure of the God–human relationship can be integrated into any Free Will Defense—including Plantinga's—and reconstructed as a structural theistic Free Will Defense. I also maintained that because this structure is necessarily presupposed in the God–human relationship, it invalidates Sterba's expectation that God should intervene in every individual instance of horrendous evil.

In his article "Forty Contributors: A Response" (Sterba 2023), Sterba argues that my structuralist Free Will Defense still fails to meet the demands of his Moral Evil Prevention Requirements (MEPRs). He writes:

> Now, Balci rightly indicates how a structuralist approach directs our attention away from individual evil actions and their consequences toward structural evils and their consequences. Such an approach, however, does not evade my critique of traditional theism because my Moral Evil Prevention Requirements (MEPRs I–III) apply both to individual evil actions and their consequences as well as to structural evils and their consequences. (Sterba 2023, p. 7)

Despite this, I maintain that my theistic structuralist framework remains fully compatible with Sterba's MEPRs. The core divergence between us lies in how we conceptualize the scope of moral reasoning. Sterba construes the MEPRs strictly within the bounds of this world and what can be observed and experienced empirically. By contrast, my structuralist framework is not limited to the material world alone. Sterba is aware of this and, in fact, explicitly states his intention to exclude any compensatory or restorative justice that extends beyond this life. He writes,

> Yet, suppose that God could prevent a young child from being violently assaulted and rendered painfully crippled for the rest of her life. Suppose further that God has already done all the things with respect to the would-be perpetrator that Abd al-Jabbar claims justice requires, except for reckoning and punishment in an afterlife. Now, I claim that justice requires that God still do more in this case, as do my MEPRs. (Sterba 2023, p. 7)

What leads Sterba to conclude that the God of theism has not "done enough" in such cases ultimately reflects a deeper epistemic divide between the theist and the atheist. I believe that any argument that fails to acknowledge this divide cannot arrive at meaningful conclusions. The theory I have proposed is metaphysical in nature and not concerned with the outcomes of isolated, observable events. It does not rest on empirical verification

alone. When I claim that my framework is consistent with the MEPRs, I do so on the basis of a holistic view that encompasses both this world and the hereafter. Sterba, by contrast, insists that the theistic structure must be fully explicable within the confines of this-worldly experience. If it is not, he concludes that God's actions within that structure are morally incoherent.

But I contend that a single instance of horrendous evil need not exhaust the range of possible justifications. I still fail to see how divine justice, as articulated in Mu'tazilite concepts such as *aslah*, grace, reward, and paradise, is incompatible with the MEPRs. Sterba's insistence on immediate, this-worldly justification is ultimately at odds with the broader metaphysical commitments of theism.

Before turning to the remaining two themes in Sterba's article (Sections 3 and 4), I want to highlight a crucial difference between his expectations of an omnibenevolent and omnipotent God and those of a Muslim theist like me. This difference helps clarify why reconciliation between our views is so difficult.

2.1. Is the God Sterba Targets Truly the God of the Abrahamic Traditions?

To understand the root of my disagreement with Sterba, Alasdair MacIntyre's article "About What Do Contemporary Atheists and Theists Disagree?" (MacIntyre 2019) is particularly illuminating.[3] MacIntyre argues that the divide between theists and atheists stems not only from differing views about the existence of God, but from a deeper divergence in what counts as a valid and meaningful explanation of the world. According to him, the disagreement is not merely ontological but epistemological; it is about the types of explanations one is willing to accept as reasonable (MacIntyre 2019, p. 365).

In this light, I believe that trying to interpret God's actions solely as they appear to us—without considering the relationship between God and creation—is foreign to theistic reasoning. In my theistic structuralist framework, the moral quality of divine action cannot be understood apart from the relationship between God and humanity, and between God and the cosmos. These relationships generate mutual divine and human responsibilities that must be considered together to grasp the full picture. Why, then, should theists accept a view of the world that excludes these theistic–metaphysical contexts, as Sterba seems to do?

Moreover, the fact that these contexts may not be immediately or fully transparent to us poses no problem for the theist. MacIntyre, in one of his early writings on the problem of evil, articulates a view that remains relevant to this debate:

> What one does need is to be able to make some sort of sense out of central affirmations of theology; but one does not expect to be able to tie up all the ends into a neat package of consoling doctrine. The most therefore that I ought to want to be able to claim is that one can see in outline how the facts of evil have their place in the Christian scheme and how are not faced by a stark contradiction at this point. (MacIntyre 1961, p. 41)

The Mu'tazilite tradition, in its historical context, appears to have achieved precisely this kind of rational theological coherence within Islamic theism. What now remains is to explain, at least in outline, how the Mu'tazilites accomplished this task.

2.2. How Should Human Moral Agency Be Understood in Mu'tazilite Thought?

Abd al-Jabbar placed greater emphasis than his predecessors on the logical connection between human nature and moral and religious responsibility. At the core of this relationship, he located human freedom. For him, agency is inseparable from freedom in action. Based on this premise, he argues that a person is either a genuine moral agent or not. Since

human beings are observably capable of acting in accordance with their own intentions and desires, they must be considered true agents.

As moral agents, humans—unlike other creatures—are ethically accountable for their actions. Thus, they are eligible for both praise and blame (Abd al-Jabbar 1965a, pp. 311, 358). This forms the essential metaphysical ground upon which human freedom rests. The human being is a free moral agent, and this freedom is a necessary condition for understanding the divine–human relationship in terms of responsibility and justice (Abd al-Jabbar 1965a, p. 309).

The Mu'tazilites placed strong emphasis on interpreting human freedom as inviolable.[4] A free person is a knowing and acting subject—an autonomous individual capable of designing and executing actions as the efficient cause of their own moral good or evil. The world, as the context of human action, is defined by the presence of other agents. It is a world populated by multiple free and rational beings, each seeking their own good through acts and interactions. Therefore, an individual's flourishing depends not only on their own actions but also on the presence and freedom of others. Each person's actions are reciprocally affected by those of others (Frank 1971, pp. 8–9).

In this view, a morally responsible agent ought not to be coerced or prevented from acting freely. In Mu'tazilite theology, someone coerced into action or restricted in their ability to act is someone who has effectively been reduced to a single possible course of action. A person who acts under compulsion is not truly free, and thus not accountable before God. God can assign responsibility for an action only when the person has a genuine capacity to choose freely among alternative options (Abd al-Jabbar 1965a, p. 393; see also Schwarz 1972).

In Mu'tazilite thought, the emphasis on the moral agent's freedom from coercion and obstruction is closely tied to the principle that an action must have only one agent. Abd al-Jabbar expresses this idea succinctly: "An object of power cannot belong to two agents" (Abd al-Jabbar 1962, pp. 131, 157, 160, 176, 186; see also Schwarz 1972).[5] Accordingly, there is a categorical difference between actions that God compels humans to perform and those that God commands as the result of their free choice and voluntary obedience. To attribute a single act to two agents is logically incoherent, and God not bringing about the logically impossible does not constitute a limitation of divine power. God can assign moral responsibility for an action only when a person is genuinely free to choose the act and is presented with competing motives (Abd al-Jabbar 1965a, p. 393; see also Schwarz 1972).

Within this framework, a human being is never a metaphorical or partial agent. If a person is motivated toward an action yet the action does not occur, this can be due only to the absence of volition, lack of knowledge regarding the action, or the interference of another agent. In such cases, the person cannot be held morally accountable, and thus any divine attribution of responsibility would be invalid (see Arslan 2003, p. 57). Importantly, the logical impossibility of divine intervention in the acts of a free moral agent does not compromise God's omnipotence. According to Abd al-Jabbar, divine omnipotence pertains to absolute possibilities, not to concrete possibilities, and absolute possibility does not logically entail concrete enactment. In other words, that which is logically impossible cannot be demanded of divine power (Abd al-Jabbar 1962, p. 140; see also Frank 1985).

The metaphysical–structural framework developed by the Mu'tazilite tradition is a logical explanation for why God cannot prevent horrendous evils without undermining that very framework. This is a theistic account that cannot be fully understood within the confines of a purely this-worldly perspective; rather, it requires a metaphysical horizon that extends into the afterlife. What this framework decisively rejects is a conception of God that appears to have no intelligible purpose for creating the universe beyond preventing

horrendous evils—and no discernible moral rationale for granting humans free will or establishing a meaningful ethical relationship with them.[6]

With this in mind, I now turn to the other two main areas of Sterba's work with which I am largely in agreement. First, I will address the relationship between God, divine commands, and the objectivity of morality.

3. Divine Commands and God

Sterba opens his discussion on God and ethics with the following observation: "Many theists have thought that without the God of traditional theism, no ethics is justifiable, and, hence, these theists have been led to endorse a divine command theory of ethics" (Sterba 2024, p. 3). While the first part of this statement broadly applies to Islamic thought, the second part does not. Historically, while Muslim theologians have generally affirmed a necessary connection between God and morality, they have not felt compelled to adopt a divine command theory as the default model of that relationship. The relative absence of a clearly defined divine command ethics in Islamic theology is itself evidence of this.

For example, consider the well-known story—also referenced by Sterba—of the Prophet Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son, which appears in the Qur'an with slight variations compared to its Biblical versions. In Islamic thought, this episode has never served as a foundational narrative for a divine command theory. Even the Ash'arite school, which is generally considered the principal opponent of the Mu'tazilites and is often more sympathetic to divine command thinking, did not interpret the story in such terms. As Kazemi notes, although this story is the subject of extensive moral and philosophical debate in the Christian and Jewish traditions, it has received remarkably little attention in Islamic theological discourse and has almost never been treated as an ethical dilemma (Kazemi 2021).

This neglect, as Attar points out, is not due to oversight but to a fundamentally different framing; within Islamic tradition, the story has not been viewed as an ethical conflict between divine will and human moral rationality. As Attar writes, "The story of Abraham in the Qur'an is never invoked to support an alternative moral framework" (Attar 2017, p. 419). This view is widely reflected in Islamic theological literature. For instance, Abd al-Jabbar argues that Abraham never actually received such a command from God and that he acted based on a mistaken assumption (Abd al-Jabbar 2017, pp. 416–18).[7] Even the Ash'arites—who are often seen as proponents of extreme divine voluntarism—do not invoke this story to justify their position. In the Qur'anic narrative, the Abraham episode is tied exclusively to the Muslim ritual of animal sacrifice during Eid al-Adha. It is treated as the origin of a specific religious observance—namely, the practice of slaughtering designated animals and distributing the meat to the needy—not as a precedent for resolving moral dilemmas or justifying divine command ethics.[8]

Although the Abrahamic narrative has not been used in Islamic thought to support a divine command ethic, there are nevertheless rich and enduring debates within Islam regarding the moral nature of God's commands. A look at the discussions between the Ash'arites, who represent a more traditionalist interpretation of Islam in the 9th century, and the Mu'tazilites, who advocate a rationalist approach, reveals the depth of these theological disagreements. These debates reflect a broader theological divide in Islamic thought—between the Ash'arite vision of a God defined by power and the Mu'tazilite vision of a God defined by justice (Ay 2015). According to the Muʿtazilites, the Ashʿarites—driven by a desire to exalt God's omnipotence to its utmost—go so far as to attribute to God the power to will the unbearable, thereby ultimately compromising His wisdom and justice (Abd al-Jabbar 1960, p. 156).

Indeed, parallels to the views of Ockham and Aquinas, which Sterba references, can be found almost identically within Ash'arite theology. According to the Ash'arites, moral properties such as "good" and "evil" are assigned to actions solely by God's will through His commands and prohibitions. For example, lying is morally wrong simply because God has designated it as such. If God were to will that lying be morally good, then it would indeed be good (Kazanç 2007). However, while the Ash'arites acknowledge this as a theoretical possibility rooted in God's omnipotence, they also stress that such actions would contradict God's wisdom, and therefore God would not actually will them.

In short, even within the traditionalist Ash'arite framework, there is a basic consensus that God does not command immoral acts. Thus, the ethical dilemmas that Sterba associates with grounding morality solely in divine commands do not trouble Islamic proponents of divine command theory. They believe that God, in accordance with His wisdom (ḥikma), would never act irrationally. This position finds strong support in numerous Qur'anic verses that explicitly appeal to God's moral rationality (see for example, in the Quran 2:170–171; 6:151).

While the idea of grounding moral values solely in divine commands is not particularly compelling within Islamic theism, Sterba also finds it problematic to ground morality in God's nature. Because he seeks an "abstract norm" in ethics (Sterba 2024, p. 6), he argues that tying morality to God's nature renders God incapable of being a rational moral agent—just as in divine command theory (Sterba 2024, p. 6). For Sterba, then, whether morality is grounded in God's will or God's nature, the result is the same: God ceases to be a moral agent and becomes merely the source of a subjective norm.

The Mu'tazilites, while not supporters of divine command theory, also do not advocate a complete separation between God and morality. In fact, for them, the key to securing moral objectivity lies precisely in the relationship between God and morality. From a Mu'tazilite perspective, objective moral principles are only possible within a framework in which God is ontologically involved in the moral order. Yet, in contrast to Sterba's worry, this involvement does not strip God of the status of a rational moral agent. Rather, God enters into a relationship with human beings in such a way that He can be judged by universal moral standards. In other words, being subject to fundamental moral norms binds not only human beings but also God Himself (Frank 1983, p. 207).[9] This formulation is a conceptual extension of Abd al-Jabbar's moral theology, particularly his doctrine of *aslah* (obligatory goodness), which requires that God act in ways that are recognizable to reason as just. Within the Muʿtazilite framework, this naturally entails that value terms can be attributed to God's actions in the same sense in which they apply to human actions. Abd al-Jabbar explicitly emphasizes that although it is logically possible for God to act unjustly, it is not actually possible (*jāʾiz*) for Him to do so in reality (Abd al-Jabbar 1962, p. 177; 2013, p. 9; see also Hourani 1971, pp. 97–102). Such behavior is impossible both rationally and morally. In the Muʿtazilite ethical system, objective moral values—when applied to God—function as constraints on divine volition, limiting God's ability to act arbitrarily. By His own free and perfectly good will, God chooses to participate in this relationship. While He remains a transcendent Being and could, in theory, withdraw from or redefine this relationship, His own rational nature compels Him to remain consistently faithful to it. Thus, morality is grounded in God's nature, and that very nature imposes moral limitations on God's actions. Importantly, these are not external constraints but self-imposed boundaries—chosen by God in accordance with His rationality. Therefore, this moral limitation is unrelated to questions of divine omnipotence (Frank 1971, pp. 12–17).

The existence of a God whose nature is inherently good clearly generates moral value. From this standpoint, the Islamic conception of God fundamentally diverges from the "is–ought" distinction that Sterba—following Hume—reiterates (Sterba 2024, p. 8). In

the Mu'tazilite perspective, the proposition "God exists" (an "is" statement in Humean terms) cannot be separated from the proposition about what kind of being God ought to be. This Humean distinction, endorsed by both Hume and Sterba, is unintelligible within any theistic metaphysics. The core of this disagreement returns us to the fundamental metaphysical difference I noted at the beginning of this paper: Sterba and I operate from divergent conceptions of the relationship between the universe, the human being, and God. The very framework that insists on a rigid separation between "is" and "ought" stems from an outlook that seeks to understand all matters strictly within the confines of this world. But such an outlook undermines the rational coherence of theistic ethics—not only in Islam but in Jewish and Christian thought as well.

3.1. Human Moral Agency and Objective Moral Principles

At this point, I would like to elaborate on how the Mu'tazilites understood moral objectivity, even while affirming that God is ontologically involved in the moral order. This distinction may help clarify how a theist and an atheist might differ in their understanding of moral objectivity, despite both affirming it. For the Mu'tazilites, moral objectivity rests on three core premises. The first is ontological: terms like just, necessary, good, and evil refer to objective realities in the world, independent of any context (Hourani 1985). Therefore, moral goodness and badness are not contingent upon divine commands. The foundation of Abd al-Jabbar's moral philosophy lies precisely in this rigorous and persistent moral objectivism (Hourani 2007, p. 112). The remainder of the Mu'tazilite ethical system is built on this core.

This insistence on objectivity is deeply rooted in Qur'anic revelation, which served as a principal motivation for Mu'tazilite ethics (see Hourani 1980). According to their view, moral objectivity is best understood as the universality of moral consciousness. And this consciousness is not a product of mere accident or cultural inheritance—it is a gift endowed by God to humanity. This notion again assumes, as I have emphasized throughout this paper, a specific kind of God–human relationship embedded within a theistic structure. Frank captures this well: "Although the fact of such universal moral consciousness is taken as given, it is not given simply, but complexly understood in terms of the nature of man and the nature of God" (Frank 1971, p. 5).

To affirm human freedom as moral agency, the Mu'tazilites assume that human beings are endowed with an innate capacity to discern between good and evil.[10] In other words, human beings are equipped with general moral principles that they can arrive at through reason—especially when their intellect reaches maturity and is supplemented by both general and specific forms of knowledge. In summary, the Mu'tazilites hold that human beings possess (1) a natural desire to seek their own good, (2) an innate capacity to act, and (3) an inherent understanding of the fundamental criteria of good and evil. The human drive to discover and pursue what is best in their actions is not limited to superficial or instrumental benefits; it also involves a deeper concern for what is ultimately and genuinely good. This is precisely the foundation upon which the Mu'tazilites build their notion of a moral duty to investigate the nature and basis of existence itself.

Given that individuals are responsible for discerning what contributes to their well-being and avoiding what harms them, they are also compelled—on the basis of their rational awareness of good and evil and their inherent concern for the good—to pursue knowledge of the ultimate conditions of their existence. Two key observations follow from this view: (1) such concern for the good is inseparable from any being endowed with reason, and from this perspective (2), the human pursuit of moral goodness ultimately and necessarily points toward God as the source of all true and final good (Frank 1971, pp. 8–11).

The second and third premises of the Mu'tazilite moral system are theological in nature, both relating to the nature of God. The second premise affirms that God possesses absolute omnipotence. According to Abd al-Jabbar, while it is logically possible for God to act unjustly, it is not in fact permissible for Him to do so. Such behavior would be impermissible both rationally and morally. This distinction is drawn in order to uphold the concept of divine omnipotence without compromising divine justice. The third premise pertains to God's relationship with human beings. It holds that, as a consequence of the moral responsibility He has endowed to humanity—responsibility that is oriented toward the good—God will reward justice and punish injustice in the afterlife. Here, the objective moral consciousness granted to human beings plays a vital role in grounding their responsibility and is further supported by divine commands. However, divine commands are not the source of moral principles themselves; rather, they provide guidance on matters that cannot be discerned through natural reason alone—such as specific forms of worship and details about the afterlife (Hourani 1985).

In this regard, divine commands serve primarily to reinforce objective morality rather than define it. Their role is secondary—to promote right action and proper belief, not to determine what is morally good or bad. Divine revelation does not dictate anything that reason could not have already discerned as morally right or wrong. Abd al-Jabbar puts it succinctly in the following way:

> A rational person does not need divine commands to recognize the evil of injustice and ingratitude or the goodness of justice and thankfulness. Similarly, in matters concerning humans where rational evidence is already accessible, no divine command is needed, for one can contemplate and grasp the intended meaning through reflection. (see Kazanç 2007, pp. 184–85)

Abd al-Jabbar argues that claiming divine commands are necessary for knowing moral good and evil would lead to a tautology; if a divine command is needed to establish moral truths, then that command itself would also require justification by another divine command, which would be absurd (Abd al-Jabbar 1965b, pp. 149–53). Similarly, in another of his works, he states, "We do not claim that revelation—that is, divine commands—necessitates anything regarding good and evil. Divine commands merely indicate moral actions, just as reason does" (Abd al-Jabbar 1962, p. 64).

In this context, one might consider Abd al-Jabbar's position as potentially supportive of Sterba's highest moral norm—the imperative "to treat all relevant interests fairly" (Sterba 2024, p. 8). However, while Abd al-Jabbar grounds this imperative in the good nature of God, Sterba dismisses such a foundation as invalid—precisely because, in his view, God fails to prevent horrendous evils (Sterba 2024, p. 11). Yet as previously argued, the Mu'tazilite conception of God differs fundamentally from the God Sterba critiques. Consequently, grounding objective moral principles in the divine nature remains a valid and coherent position within theistic moral frameworks.

3.2. Sterba's Divine Command Theory and the Muʿtazilite Response

Sterba asks how we are to understand God's commands—even if we accept that God exists (Sterba 2024, p. 4). For instance, if we had a list of divine commands, how would we interpret them? As I emphasized earlier, however, for the Muʿtazilites—who do not support a divine command theory—God would not issue a command that contradicts human moral rationality. Similarly, Sterba rightly argues that in order to understand divine commands, we must know what they are intended to achieve. Yet the divine command theory leaves no room for human moral reasoning and thus fails in this regard (Sterba 2024, pp. 4–5).

Sterba also highlights how seemingly conflicting commands—such as feeding the poor versus providing for one's own family—might be confusing under a divine command framework (Sterba 2024, p. 5). Such dilemmas arise when moral content is grounded solely in divine commands. These criticisms are strikingly similar to those the Muʿtazilites leveled against the Ashʿarites, who supported a version of the divine command theory. The Muʿtazilite insistence on prioritizing reason over revelation, and their belief that values must be accessible to human reason independently of scripture, thus appears well-founded. Indeed, the Qur'an contains numerous references emphasizing the harmony between revelation and human rationality, which serves as a fundamental basis for this position.

3.3. Objective Moral Principles and Change

The Muʿtazilite insistence on moral objectivism is directly linked to their commitment to the immutability of moral principles. Divine commands do not render an act moral, nor do they provide an epistemological justification for it. Therefore, the content of what is moral cannot be altered by divine decree. Moral knowledge, according to the Muʿtazilites, consists of necessary truths. What they mean by "necessary" is knowledge that we ourselves do not bring into existence, that lies beyond our capacity to produce, change at will, reject, or manipulate. Such knowledge is something to which all individuals are inevitably led; it is evident, allows no room for doubt, and thus is accessible to any rational agent, whether theist or atheist, without effort. By contrast, acquired knowledge is that which is obtained through evidence and is subject to error. While such knowledge may not provide a foundation for moral objectivity, it can still be useful in moral reasoning. Accordingly, human moral knowledge relies on a combination of both these necessary truths, to which we are naturally called, and the knowledge we acquire through learning and experience (Vasalou 2008, pp. 15–16, see also Abd al-Jabbar 2013).

Sterba's claim that objective moral requirements may change (Sterba 2024, p. 9) corresponds to what the Muʿtazilites would categorize as secondary moral knowledge—knowledge shaped by experience and evidence, yet open to error. However, the Muʿtazilite tradition does not treat such knowledge as part of the category of objective moral truths. From their perspective, the moral status of an action is, first and foremost, an essential attribute independent of its consequences. That is, an act's moral character is intrinsic and not derived from its outcomes. For example, lying is judged to be morally wrong because it is a lie, not because of any resulting harm or benefit. As Abd al-Jabbar states, "We label such actions as good or bad without regard to their consequences" (see Leaman 1980, p. 129). Even if lying were to prevent harm or yield some benefit, it would remain unequivocally wrong.

Nevertheless, according to Abd al-Jabbar, the moral evaluation of some actions may depend on multiple factors, such as the presence of harm or benefit, or whether the action is permitted. Still, certain actions—such as lying, committing injustice, killing a person, or commanding another to commit evil—are categorically wrong regardless of context or outcome (see Leaman 1980, pp. 129–30). While the inherent wrongness of lying is considered necessary knowledge, the judgment that all instances of lying are wrong belongs to acquired knowledge and requires empirical justification. Not all universal moral propositions are accessible as necessary truths. A person may only come to accept the principle that all lies are wrong by considering examples where a lie neither prevents harm nor produces good. Yet this interpretive variability does not undermine the underlying objective moral principle. In other words, the diversity of human judgments does not alter the objectivity of moral norms (Cengiz 2010, pp. 11–12).

The Muʿtazilite distinction between necessary objective moral knowledge and contingent, acquired moral principles does not correspond to Sterba's distinction between

objective moral requirements and ultimate moral requirements (Sterba 2024, p. 9). While Sterba attributes both objectivity and changeability to objective moral requirements, for the Muʿtazilites, change pertains only to acquired moral knowledge, which is by nature non-necessary and thus cannot be truly objective. Objective moral truths, in the Muʿtazilite view, are necessary and grounded in God's nature; therefore, they are immutable. For them to change would entail a change in God's nature—which is itself necessary and unchanging.

That said, I support Sterba's view that objective moral norms can be open to debate (Sterba 2024, p. 13). Indeed, the existence of moral disagreement does not imply the absence of objective moral truths. Disagreement need not lead us to moral subjectivism. Disputes occur in all domains—including science and mathematics, which we typically regard as paradigms of objectivity. For instance, while different cultures may have historically held varying conceptions of the earth's shape, this does not mean the earth lacks an objective form. Similarly, moral debate does not negate the existence of objective moral realities. As Doko (2016, pp. 413–15) argues, moral disagreements often point to deeper normative structures that transcend individual perspectives. For example, the evolutionary claim that men are biologically more inclined toward polygamy or adultery than women does not invalidate the objective moral wrongness of adultery. In fact, our disagreements and debates about moral issues are indicative of underlying moral structures that guide discourse—structures that, for many meta-ethicists, affirm the existence of objective morality.

4. Does Evolutionary Theory Undermine Objective Morality?

Unlike Street (2006), Sterba argues that although Darwinian evolutionary theory may not be sufficient to explain the objective moral principles we endorse today, it does not undermine moral objectivity either (Sterba 2024, pp. 12–13). According to Street, the process of natural selection not only fails to help us reach objective moral judgments but also actively distorts them (Street 2006, p. 121).[11] Sterba, by contrast, maintains that while the moral insights and intuitions we acquire through evolution may not always guide us to moral truths, they can nevertheless assist in reaching them. In cases where these intuitions are flawed, they can be corrected by appealing to objective moral principles (Sterba 2024, p. 15). On this point, I am in agreement with Sterba. As he would likely acknowledge, Darwinian evolutionary theory may explain the biological dimensions of human nature, but it offers little about the nature of morality itself.

This distinction can be illustrated with a simple example; evolutionary theory might explain why we care for our children or why lying could have been evolutionarily disadvantageous. However, it does not account for the origin of the moral truth that we ought to care for our children or that lying is wrong. Nevertheless, this limitation does not imply that evolution undermines the idea of objective morality (Doko 2016, p. 418). In this regard, I support Sterba's critique of Street's argument and would add that the relationship he draws between evolution and morality is also a plausible one from the standpoint of Islamic theism.

A particular form of evolutionary theory has long held a place within Islamic thought. Historically, many Muslim scholars have found no contradiction between scientifically supported evolutionary theories and their religious beliefs (Alpyağıl 2013, pp. 473–74). The renowned Islamic historian Hamidullah emphasizes that evolution has been defended by various authors within the Islamic intellectual tradition and has not been perceived as a theological threat (Hamîdullah 2010, pp. 175–77; see also Guessoum 2010, pp. 314–24).

In fact, the idea that life evolved from primitive cells into simple organisms, followed by more complex beings and ultimately humans, appeared to some extent in Islamic thought well before Darwin. Al-Jahiz (d. 869), an early scholar from the Mu'tazilite tradition, referred to a biological evolution in his writings (Bayrakdar 1983, pp. 307–15).

The renowned Islamic moral philosopher Ibn Miskawayh (d. 1030) and the scientist Ibn al-Haytham (d. 1040) provided more structured accounts of some evolutionary ideas. Similarly, the Andalusian mystical philosopher Ibn al-'Arabi (d. 1148) discussed a form of spiritual evolution in relation to human beings. The philosophical novel Hayy ibn Yaqdhan, written by the Andalusian scholar Ibn Tufayl (d. 1185), is also grounded in some evolutionary ideas. Perhaps most explicitly, the historian and philosopher Ibn Khaldun (d. 1406) refers directly to evolution in his Muqaddimah, where he claims that the earliest stage of human development emerged from a species of monkey with rudimentary perception and intelligence. However, he argues that humans separated from this species at the point where higher faculties such as speech and reflective thought emerged. In Ottoman intellectual history, Ibrahim Hakki Efendi (d. 1780) also presented a detailed summary of Islamic evolutionary theories in his work Marifetname (For all these texts, see Alpyağıl 2013).[12]

Within these debates, the evolutionary links between humans and other living beings have generally not been a central concern for Muslim scholars. As Solomon notes, the Qur'an neither explicitly supports nor opposes evolution. Thus, Muslims who accept evolutionary theory have not typically faced serious theological dilemmas (see Jalajel 2009). In the context of Islamic theism, a plausible evolutionary theory can be seen as part of a divinely instituted order—one grounded in grace and providence. From this perspective, evolution provides an important explanatory framework for understanding humanity's place in the cosmos.

What distinguishes humans from other beings is their refined moral intuition, which they owe to the divine plan. I see no inherent contradiction between the evolutionary development of human reason and the objective moral principles rooted in God. On the contrary, the evolutionary refinement of human moral consciousness may be understood as part of God's design. It should be emphasized here that I interpret evolution as a divinely guided process. Objective moral principles exist because God exists, and there is no theological conflict in believing that God enabled human beings to evolve in such a way that they could perceive these objective moral truths. Therefore, attempts to undermine objective morality through evolutionary theory are only plausible when evolution is interpreted in a framework divorced from theism.[13]

Street argues that the evolutionary process was not aimed at producing moral judgments and that it prioritized the survival and reproductive advantage of our early ancestors rather than the truth of their moral beliefs (Street 2006, pp. 128–29). She rightly raises the following central question:

> The basic problem for realism is that it needs to take a position on what relation there is, if any, between the selective forces that have influenced the content of our evaluative judgements, on the one hand, and the independent evaluative truths that realism posits, on the other. (Street 2006, p. 121)

From the perspective of Islamic theistic evolution, this ontological connection is possible if one accepts that God is both the initiator and sustainer of the evolutionary process as well as the source of objective moral principles. The moral intuitions gifted to us through evolution can be rationally structured into an objective moral framework—made possible by God's moral nature itself. Sterba similarly acknowledges that evolutionary intuitions may conflict with moral principles. However, he contends that such conflicts are resolved not through principles grounded in God's nature, but through rationally derived, non-question-begging compromises (Sterba 2024, p. 15). In other words, Sterba envisions that when moral intuitions shaped by evolution fail to guide us correctly, we can still reach objective moral principles through rational reflection—principles that do not presuppose any prior commitments. Up to this point, I agree with Sterba. Yet I would argue that these

non-question-begging compromises must ultimately be grounded in God's nature to serve as a final moral foundation. Sterba would likely reject this claim, since grounding them in God's nature would, in his view, violate the independence of moral truths. However, is not the very idea of a non-question-begging compromise itself dependent on human rationality? Mu'tazilite thought goes a step further by acknowledging the dependence of moral objectivity on human rationality while ultimately rooting that rationality in God's moral nature. In this regard, I see no essential difference between Sterba and the Mu'tazilites in terms of accepting some form of moral dependency. The only difference is that Mu'tazilite theology explicitly acknowledges and justifies this dependency through divine nature.

In this light, Sterba's effort to rebut Street's argument and to establish a positive relationship between evolution and moral objectivity becomes tenable only if he allows—at least as a possibility—for a God who both guides the evolutionary process and embeds objective moral principles into human reason. Sterba's rejection of such a divine reference is, once again, tied to what he sees as God's alleged failure to prevent horrendous evils. But as I have shown through the Mu'tazilite framework, this is not a failure at all. Ultimately, using Alasdair MacIntyre's language, the difference between Sterba's and my view is rooted in fundamentally divergent conceptions of God—differences that cannot be reconciled at the metaphysical level (see MacIntyre 2019). If Sterba aims to effectively challenge Street's anti-realist critique, he must make conceptual room, at least hypothetically, for the theistic God in his framework linking evolution and moral objectivity. The Muʿtazilite model, by rooting moral truth in God's rational nature, addresses this explanatory gap as Street points, while retaining moral realism.[14]

5. Conclusions

This study has examined James Sterba's arguments concerning the problem of evil, divine command ethics, and the relationship between evolution and objective morality from an Islamic, particularly Mu'tazilite, theological perspective. In response to Sterba's challenge regarding divine inaction in the face of horrendous evils, I have offered a "theistic structuralist" defense grounded in the thought of Abd al-Jabbar. This view centers on human freedom and responsibility, positing that God's non-intervention in certain instances of evil can be justified within a broader, metaphysically coherent framework of divine justice—one that includes the afterlife. In this way, I propose a vertically oriented metaphysical dimension to Sterba's primarily empirical MEPRs.

Regarding divine command theory, while I agree with many of Sterba's criticisms, I argue from a Mu'tazilite standpoint that objective morality is not arbitrarily willed by God. Rather, it is grounded in God's rational and good nature, to which God consistently adheres. As for evolution, I concur with Sterba that evolutionary theory does not, by itself, undermine objective morality. However, I contend that objective morality can only be robustly justified within a theistic framework in which evolution is initiated and sustained by God and in which humans are capable of discerning objective moral truths that are inherent in God's nature.

Ultimately, I argue that my main points of divergence with Sterba lie in our foundational metaphysical commitments. Any full reconciliation of these views would require Sterba to acknowledge the explanatory power of a theistic metaphysics that extends beyond empirical assessment—an outcome that appears unlikely.

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Notes

1 In the references, he will be cited as Kadi Abdülcebbar as in the Arabic original.

2 While writing this article, I had the opportunity to discuss Sterba's article several times during my Ph.D. class with my student, Sümeyra Yumak Kaya. I would like to thank her for her valuable intellectual contributions to these discussions.

3 While writing this article, I was deeply saddened to learn of Alasdair MacIntyre's passing. I would like to take this opportunity to acknowledge, with gratitude, the profound influence his reflections on the viability of a theistically informed philosophy have consistently had on my thinking.

4 I need to clarify here that in referring to the Mu'tazila, I am not implying a deistic perspective. Indeed, this very [stance of] non-intervention is merely the logical consequence of a specific God-human relationship. I have also expressed this in my previous article (see Balci 2022, p. 12).

5 One might reasonably think that a single action could be performed by two individuals simultaneously; for example, two people might press nuclear launch buttons at the same time. However, the Muʿtazilite view makes a crucial distinction between purposeful and conscious action. While any act can be purposeful, only morally significant actions—what Muʿtazilites call "conscious acts"—require the presence of knowledge. In such acts, knowledge must accompany the agent both before and after the action. Thus, these are not simple acts like pressing a button but rather complex moral events involving a sequence of decisions, prior deliberations, and intentions. When multiple steps come together to constitute a single conscious act, each contributing part must involve the agent's awareness, will, motivation, and intentionality. As Abd al-Jabbar explains, "A conscious act is an act that originates from a capable agent in such a way that it could not have proceeded from another power-holder" (Abd al-Jabbar 1965c, p. 156; see also Cengiz 2012, pp. 75–76). Hence, the Muʿtazilite claim refers specifically to full and complex moral authorship in the context of moral accountability. I am grateful to the reviewer whose question led me to develop this clarification. Nevertheless, I also appreciate the Academic Editor's comment regarding the possibility that seemingly mechanical acts, such as pressing a button, may still involve a conscious decision-making process. However, I believe that in the Muʿtazilite framework, "moral consciousness" encompasses a broader perspective than what is commonly understood today. In Muʿtazilite thought, consciousness refers to a wide-ranging cognitive framework woven from elements such as long-term deliberation, value judgments, conceptual coherence, and personal responsibility. In this sense, Muʿtazilite moral consciousness is an internalized reflection of the entire chain of intention behind an action. An action must rely not only on willpower but also on rational and moral processes constructed in harmony with ethical values. For this reason, the Muʿtazilite claim focuses on metaphysical agency and the nature of responsibility. What Qadi Abd al-Jabbar aims to emphasize here is the depth and seriousness of being a moral agent. Therefore, in his view, it is not conceivable that two agents with totally identical metaphysical contexts could simultaneously share authorship of a single action.

6 A potential tension may be noted here: if God grants moral agency and freedom, and horrendous evils undermine that very agency, then God seems to allow for the destruction of the gift He bestows. One way to address this concern is to distinguish between individual experiential freedom and the metaphysical structure of human freedom granted by God. From the Muʿtazilite perspective, God grants moral agency not merely to isolated individuals but to humanity as a moral collective. This freedom is not contingent on every individual always being equally able to act; rather, it is embedded in a broader divine framework that permits human beings, as a community of agents, to act with autonomy and responsibility. That individuals may suffer constraints—especially through the wrongdoing of others—does not undermine the structure of freedom itself. On the contrary, the possibility that one person can limit another's agency is precisely what it means to have morally consequential freedom; it is relational, cumulative, and real. God grants freedom in such a way that it carries within itself the potential for moral misuse, and this is not a flaw in the gift but part of its very intelligibility. Therefore, God does not revoke or contradict the freedom He grants when He allows horrendous evil; He permits it as part of the price of sustaining a world in which agents are truly responsible not just for themselves, but for the conditions of others' agency as well. I would like to thank the reviewer whose comment prompted me to elaborate on this point.

7 Although Abd al-Jabbar's engagement with the ethical dimension of the Qur'anic story of Abraham indicates his deep concern with the Qur'an's moral framework, it is noteworthy that he makes no comment on verses related to women that, from a modern perspective, appear ethically problematic. For instance, verses such as 4:34 and 4:11—which Amir Saemi, in his book, conceptualizes as part of the "problem of the seemingly prescribed evil in the scripture" (see Saemi 2024)—do not appear to have drawn Abd al-Jabbar's attention. The most plausible explanation for this silence lies in the broader context of classical kalām thought, where theologians typically did not engage with the practical or social dimensions of morality. I would like to thank the Academic Editor who encouraged me to reflect on this interesting particular point.

[8] Even al-Ghazālī, the powerful Ashʿarite theologian and prominent voice of traditional Islam, though he accepts that Abraham truly received such a command from God, interprets this as a command that was subsequently revoked (*nash*) by God Himself (see Al-Ghazali 1995, p. 136). This suggests that the Abraham narrative has not been framed—by either the rationalist or traditionalist strands of Islamic theology—as a paradigmatic example of the moral relationship between God and humanity. Even if one were to interpret the story literally, it must be understood as part of a unique and intimate encounter between God and Abraham. Indeed, nowhere else in the Qurʾan does God command the sacrifice of one's child. In this respect, Kierkegaard's interpretation of the Abraham story as a suspension of the ethical, and his emphasis on Abraham's deeply personal and private relationship with God (see Kierkegaard 1985), aligns in an unexpected way with al-Ghazālī's perspective. Furthermore, within Western philosophical thought, there is also a significant debate about whether the story of Abraham should be viewed as posing an ethical problem at all. For a critical perspective on the ethical implications of the Abraham narrative, see Green (1993). I would like to thank the academic editor for drawing my attention to this reference.

[9] The Muʿtazilite attribution of moral qualities to God is grounded in their conception of God as a person (shakhs). Indeed, God is a person, and it is by virtue of His personhood that He possesses moral attributes. However, unlike human persons, God's moral attributes are not acquired or externally imposed; rather, His essence and attributes are inseparable. This perspective finds support in the Qur'an, where God's moral character is presented as essential and inseparable from His being (see, for example, in the Quran 2: 226, 235; 3: 4, 146; 13:31). Attributing morality—an essentially human concept—to God requires a particular form of anthropomorphic language, not in an ontological sense, but in a moral–linguistic one. It allows for human beings to understand divine action through moral categories, thereby establishing a likeness not in essence but in moral intention and consequence (see Güler 1998). I am grateful to the reviewer for drawing my attention to this important dimension of the discussion.

[10] At this point, one can discern notable points of contact between Muʿtazilite moral theology and aspects of modern moral philosophy. Of course, the Muʿtazilites were not confronted with the epistemic challenges posed by modern empiricism. What they faced in their own historical context was a form of anti-rationalist theology. In response to such opposition, Abd al-Jabbar affirmed that the knowledge of good and evil is innately accessible to human reason. In doing so, he offers a form of deontological intuitionism that resonates with certain contemporary positions. What sets him apart, however, is his insistence that this rational moral knowledge should nonetheless be supported and confirmed by revelation (see Hourani 1985).

[11] For a discussion of Street's arguments in Turkish philosophical literature, see (Yöney 2017).

[12] It is important to clarify, however, that these early ideas are not equivalent to Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection, which relies on a specific empirical and mechanistic framework. Although some pre-modern Islamic thinkers articulated notions that resemble aspects of biological transformation, their views lack the methodological foundations of modern evolutionary theory. Thus, my reference is not to claim historical or theoretical equivalence but to highlight the conceptual openness within the Islamic tradition that allows for meaningful engagement with modern discussions on evolutionary ethics. I would like to thank the Academic Editor whose comment prompted me to elaborate on this point.

[13] Acknowledging the possibility of a theistic interpretation of evolution does not require one to believe in evolutionary theory. For an excellent example of rejecting evolution while still arguing that it can be interpreted in a manner compatible with theism, see Bilgili (2015). "An Ottoman Response to Darwinism: Ismail Fenni on Islam and Evolution." *The British Journal for the History of Science* 48: 565–82. For contemporary Turkish Muslim philosophers who argue that evolutionary theory is a possible theory but personally maintain an agnostic stance on the matter, see Doko (2016, pp. 420–21) and Taslaman (2022).

[14] The Muʿtazilite metaphysical moral realist framework can engage productively with contemporary theistic moral realism. The positions defended by modern Christian philosophers such as Stoker, Craig, Howe, Copan, and Lennox (see Copan et al. 2021), as well as by Taliaferro (1994), offer fertile ground for philosophical and theological dialogue with the Muʿtazilite moral perspective in Islam. While this article does not undertake such a comparative engagement, the need for this kind of interfaith and cross-traditional moral discourse is both evident and urgent.

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