

The Justice of God and the Best of All Possible Worlds: The Theodicy of Ibn Taymiyya

Jon Hoover*

Introduction¹

The fourteenth century Muslim jurist Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328) is known widely today as an inspiration to a broad range of reform-minded Sunnī Muslims extending from modernists to contemporary radical Islamists such as Osama Bin Laden. Despite his contemporary significance, Ibn Taymiyya's theology has received very little attention in European-language scholarship.² Perhaps this is because Ibn Taymiyya's extensive polemic against classical Islamic theology and philosophy, as well as against Sufi philosophical mysticism, has dampened expectation that this Ḥanbalī traditionalist might have significant theological views of his own. Be that as it may, I wish to show that on the core theological

* Assistant Professor of Islamic Studies, Near East School of Theology, Beirut.

1. This article is drawn with modifications from Chapter Six of Jon Hoover, "An Islamic Theodicy: Ibn Taymiyya on the Wise Purpose of God, Human Agency, and Problems of Evil and Justice" (Ph.D. diss., University of Birmingham, UK, 2002), the whole of which is being prepared for publication in a substantially revised form.
2. Important exceptions include Shahab Ahmed, "Ibn Taymiyyah and the Satanic verses," *Studia Islamica* 87 (1998): 67-124; Daniel Gimaret, "Théories de l'acte humain dans l'école Ḥanbalite," *Bulletin d'études orientales* 29 (1977): 156-178; Sherman A. Jackson, "Ibn Taymiyyah on Trial in Damascus," *Journal of Semitic Studies* 39 (Spring 1994): 41-85; and the references in the following two notes.

issue of theodicy Ibn Taymiyya is an optimist—that is, he believes this to be the best of all possible worlds—and that this places him in the company of eminent Muslim optimists such as the theologian and Sufi al-Ghazālī (d. 1111) and the philosophical Sufi mystic Ibn ‘Arabī (d. 1240), figures that he criticizes sharply on other counts.

Even though hardly known, observation of Ibn Taymiyya’s optimism is not new. In a 1939 overview of Ibn Taymiyya’s life and thought, Henri Laoust briefly notes that Ibn Taymiyya upholds a theodicy of optimism.³ Laoust states that for Ibn Taymiyya everything that God wills and creates is good from God’s perspective and evil does not have real existence. This article will confirm and elaborate Laoust’s observation through more extensive analysis of Ibn Taymiyya’s scattered writings on God’s justice (*‘adl*).⁴ In addition to revisiting Laoust’s sources, I will draw on treatises not available to Laoust, especially *A Rule Concerning What It Means for the Lord to Be Just* (*Qā’ida fī ma’nā kawn al-Rabb ‘ādilan*, hereafter *Rule*) published in Cairo in 1969.⁵ In this text Ibn Taymiyya affirms clearly that this world is the best possible.

This article divides into two parts. The first part surveys a three-fold typology of views on God’s justice that Ibn Taymiyya outlines in a number of places in his corpus.⁶ These ‘justice’ passages vary widely in

3. Henri Laoust, *Essai sur les doctrines sociales et politiques de Taḥṣīd-d-Dīn Aḥmad b. Taymiyya, canoniste ḥanbalite né à Harrān en 661/1262, mort à Damas en 728/1328* (Cairo: Imprimerie de l’institut français d’archéologie orientale, 1939), 169.

4. Joseph Normant Bell, *Love Theory in Later Ḥanbalite Islam* (Albany, NY: State University of New York, 1979), 46-91, also touches on Ibn Taymiyya’s optimism with explanation of his affirmation that God wills all existents for a wise purpose (*ḥikma*), but Bell does not treat Ibn Taymiyya’s view of God’s justice.

5. “Qā’ida fī ma’nā kawn al-Rabb ‘ādilan wa fī tanazzuhihi ‘an al-zulm wa fī ithbāt ‘adlihi wa iḥsānihi [hereafter ‘*Ādil*’ in the notes and *Rule* in the text],” in *Jāmi’ al-rasā’il li-Ibn Taymiyya*, ed. Muḥammad Rashād Sālim, vol. 1 (Cairo: Maṭba‘at al-madanī, 1389/1969), 121-142.

completeness and length. At times, the shaykh focuses more on polemic against opponents while at other times he devotes greater attention to explaining his own point of view. There is no one passage that sufficiently comprehends what is found in the others to serve as a basis for exposition. However, the views presented in the various texts are consistent, and this justifies a composite account for the sake of avoiding repetition of basic ideas. Most importantly for our purposes, these typologies clarify that Ibn Taymiyya is an optimist in contrast to two other major theological options entertained by the Islamic tradition. The second part of the article examines how Ibn Taymiyya overcomes difficulties his theodicy entails for God’s power and shows that he is among the earlier figures in the Islamic tradition to accept the Ghazālīan dictum, “There is nothing in possibility more wonderful than what is.”

1.0 Ibn Taymiyya’s Three-fold Typology of Views of God’s Justice (*‘adl*)

Ibn Taymiyya’s justice typology encompasses three basic views of God’s justice found in the Islamic tradition. The first type is the Mu’tazilī conception of God’s justice as retributive. The second is the Ash‘arī voluntaristic notion of God’s justice. The third type, Ibn Taymiyya’s own position, defines divine justice as putting things in their proper places.

6. The main passages are found in ‘*Ādil*, 121-6, 126-130; *Kitāb al-nubuwwāt* [hereafter *Nubuwwāt*] (Beirut: Dār al-qalam, n.d.), 143-7; “Sharḥ ḥadīth annī ḥarramt al-zulm ‘alā nafsi,” or “‘An ma’nā ḥadīth Abī Dharr...yā ‘ibādī annī ḥarramt al-zulm ‘alā nafsi [hereafter *Abū Dharr*],” in *Majmū‘ fatawa Shaykh al-Islām Aḥmad b. Taymiyya* [hereafter MF], eds. ‘Abd al-Raḥmān b. Muḥammad b. Qāsim and Muḥammad b. ‘Abd al-Raḥmān b. Muḥammad, 37 vols. (Cairo: Dār al-Raḥma, n.d.), 18:136-209, particularly 137-156; “Su’ila Shaykh al-Islām...fa-qīla: yā ayyuhā al-ḥabr alladhī...” or “Su’ila ‘an abyāt fī al-jabr [hereafter *Jabr*],” in MF 8:448-515, particularly 505-510; and *Minḥāj al-sunna al-nabawiyya fī naqḍ kalām al-Shī‘a al-Qadariyya* [hereafter *Minḥāj*] in the notes and *The Sunnī Way* in the text], ed. Muḥammad Rashād Sālim, 9 vols. (Riyadh: Jāmi‘at al-Imām Muḥammad b. Su‘ūd al-Islāmiyya, 1406/1986), 1:134-141, 1:451-4, 2:304-313, 3:20-3. Occasional reference is also made below to texts in MF other than these listed here.

1.1 The Mu'tazilī Theodicy of God's Retributive Justice

Mu'tazilī theologians thrived in the ninth through eleventh centuries but died out in Sunnī Islam by Ibn Taymiyya's time in the fourteenth century. However, Ibn Taymiyya does face living Mu'tazilī theology in the Shī'ism of his day. In his large work *The Sunnī Way* (*Minhāj al-sunna*), Ibn Taymiyya speaks of the "moderns (*muta'akhhirīn*) of the Imāmīs,"⁷ that is, Twelver Shī'īs who follow the Mu'tazilīs in theology. This term is aimed especially at the fourteenth century Twelver Shī'ī scholar 'Allāma al-Ḥillī (d. 1325) whom Ibn Taymiyya refutes directly in *The Sunnī Way*.

In the Mu'tazilī view God's justice is retributive in the sense that God metes out reward and punishment in due proportion to human good and bad deeds, respectively. Ibn Taymiyya observes that the Mu'tazilīs maintain that God does not will or create human acts of disobedience, iniquity and unbelief. Rather, humans have free will in a fully libertarian sense. They create their own acts, and so God is just to punish those who disobey His command.⁸ If God were to create injustice directly in humans, God would be unjust to punish it. If God were to chastise sins that He created, that would be unjust and undeserved harm.⁹ Moreover in the Mu'tazilī doctrine God must provide all possible help to His servants for carrying out His commands, and God must help everyone equally.¹⁰ If God singled out one person over another for His mercy and bounty (*fadl*), that would be unjust.¹¹ Ibn Taymiyya also mentions the Mu'tazilī view that God must do what is best (*aṣḥaḥ*) for His servants, at least in matters of religion or, according to some of them, even in worldly matters as well.¹² Beyond this, the shaykh mentions the Mu'tazilī doctrine that God's reason for creating human beings was to benefit them and subject them to

7. *Minhāj*, 1:134.

8. 'Ādil, JR 123.

9. *Abū Dharr*, MF 18:138, 152; 'Ādil, JR 127. See also *Abū Dharr*, MF 18:145, for the definition of injustice as undeserved harm (*iḍrār ḡhayr mustahiqq*).

10. *Abū Dharr*, MF 18:138.

11. MF 8:92.

12. *Minhāj*, 3:198; MF 8:92.

the possibility of earning reward.¹³ The main gap in Ibn Taymiyya's reports on the Mu'tazilīs is their doctrine that God must provide compensations (*'iwaḍ*) to all creatures who suffer unjustly.¹⁴

Ibn Taymiyya vigorously attacks the Mu'tazilī position. He rejects their free will theodicy outright because it posits humans creating their own acts. The shaykh maintains instead that God creates everything, even human acts.¹⁵ Ibn Taymiyya also rails against the Mu'tazilīs for insisting that God adhere to human standards of retribution and even for turning God into a fool in His dealings with humankind.

Ibn Taymiyya explains that the Mu'tazilīs root God's justice in the rational discernment of moral value. In the Mu'tazilī ethic reason knows acts to be objectively good or bad by virtue of attributes inherent in the acts. Thus, God must be exonerated of committing objectively bad acts. Against this, the shaykh argues that reason does not dictate that creatures and their Creator are alike to the point of being subject to the same standards of good and bad.¹⁶ In his justice passages Ibn Taymiyya then accuses the Mu'tazilīs of likening (*tamthīl*) and assimilating (*tashbīh*) God's acts to human acts and drawing an analogy from human acts to God's acts. He claims that the Mu'tazilīs set down a law for God, obligating Him to adhere to human standards of justice and forbidding Him from human notions of injustice, which, according to Ibn Taymiyya, violates God's complete unlikeness.¹⁷ He explains that the Mu'tazilīs and

13. 'Ādil, JR 128; *Jabr*, MF 8:506; *Minhāj*, 3:152-3.

14. For compensation in the thought of 'Abd al-Jabbār, see Margaretha T. Heemskerck, *Suffering in Mu'tazilite Theology: 'Abd al-Jabbār's Teaching on Pain and Divine Justice* (Leiden: Brill, 2000. 142-191). On compensation in a Shī'ī Mu'tazilī context, see Sabine Schmidtke, *The Theology of al-'Allāma al-Ḥillī (d. 726/1325)* (Berlin: Klaus Schwarz, 1991), 117-124.

15. *Abū Dharr*, MF 18:138, 148; 'Ādil, JR 129.

16. *Abū Dharr*, MF 18:147.

17. *Minhāj*, 1:447-8, 3:39-40, 3:153; *Jabr*, MF 8:505-6; *Abū Dharr*, MF 18:138, 147; MF 8:431-2; 'Ādil, JR 128. For 'Abd al-Jabbār's univocal use of analogy from the visible world to the invisible world (*qiyās al-ghā'ib 'alā al-shāhid*) in God's acts, see Daniel Gimaret, *Théories de l'acte humain en théologie musulmane* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1980), 281-3; and Heemskerck, *Suffering*, 112-3.

like-minded Shī'īs such as al-Ḥillī apply their 'law' polemically to the God of the Ash'arīs who is by definition outside the sphere of human morality. The Ash'arī God does not meet the Mu'tazilī standard of justice and so, the Mu'tazilīs conclude, this God commits bad deeds and fails to fulfil obligations.¹⁸ Ibn Taymiyya complains that the Mu'tazilīs propound similitudes (*amthāl*) for God but do not give Him the highest similitude.¹⁹ For Ibn Taymiyya it is not just a matter of the Mu'tazilī likening God to creatures. It is also that when they do they arrive at an inadequate view of God.

To illustrate further how he believes analogy and assimilation fail the Mu'tazilīs, Ibn Taymiyya juxtaposes the Muslim obligation to command the right and forbid the wrong with the Mu'tazilī view of libertarian freedom. In one text he gives the following argument: If someone were able to stop others from being unjust to one another but did not prevent them, he himself would be unjust. Implied here is that God should stop injustice if indeed He is subject to human standards. In reply the Mu'tazilīs assert that God gives humans free choice. God provides people opportunity for reward if they obey and punishment if they do not. If God were to force someone not to do something, the obligation which provides opportunity for reward would fall away. Ibn Taymiyya responds that most people say that someone who acts like this, knowing full well that his servants will not obey his command, is neither wise nor just. This would be praiseworthy only if the person did not know what was going to happen or could not prevent it, but God is all-powerful and knows future events. Someone who can prevent injustice must do so by force (*iljā'*).²⁰ In *The Sunnī Way* the shaykh mocks the Mu'tazilī view as implying that God creates power in humans by which they can lie and commit iniquity and injustice knowing full well that they will commit such acts. This necessarily implies that God is helping them to commit these deeds. Ibn

18. *Minhāj*, 1:453-4.

19. *Abū Dharr*, MF 18:138.

20. *Jabr*, MF 8:506.

Taymiyya compares this to one person giving another a sword to fight unbelievers knowing he will misuse it to kill a prophet. The shaykh says that this is foolish on the human level and that God as well is exonerated of this. He adds that God's acts are judged differently from ours and that He has a wise purpose in what He creates.²¹

In *The Sunnī Way* Ibn Taymiyya cites the famous Ash'arī story of the three brothers to show that the Mu'tazilīs' doctrine of the best falls into contradiction because it is based on assimilation of God to creatures. Rosalind Gwynne has shown that the Ash'arī theologian Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 1209) was probably the first to link this story to the break of al-Ash'arī (d. 925) from his Mu'tazilī master Abū 'Alī al-Jubbā'ī (d. 916).²² Ibn Taymiyya simply accepts the account as historical:

[Al-Ash'arī] said to [al-Jubbā'ī]: When God created three brothers, one of them died young, and the other two reached the age of accountability. One of the [latter] two believed, and the other disbelieved. [God] brought the believer into Paradise and raised his rank. He brought the young one into Paradise and made his level below [the other brother]. The young one said to Him, "O Lord! Raise me to the rank of my brother." He said, "You are not like him. He believed and committed righteous deeds. You are young, and you did not commit the deeds he did." He said, "O Lord! You made me die. If you had kept me [alive], I would have done the like of his deeds." He said, "I did what was to your benefit (*maṣlaḥa*) because I knew that if you had reached the age of accountability you would have disbelieved. Therefore, I carried you away to death." Then, the third [brother] cried out from the depths of the Fire, and he said, "O Lord! Why did you not carry me away to death before reaching the age of accountability as you carried my young brother away to death? For this would have been of benefit to me also." It

21. *Minhāj*, 3:220-1. For additional arguments of this sort, see *Minhāj*, 3:151-3/2:27-8: it would be foolish for a man to give his son money if he knew the son was going to use it to buy poison to eat; and 'Ādil, JR 128: it would be unjust for a master to let his slaves commit injustice if he could stop it. Cf. *Minhāj*, 2:312-3.

22. Rosalind W. Gwynne, "Al-Jubbā'ī, al-Ash'arī and the Three Brothers: The Uses of Fiction," *The Muslim World* 75 (July-Oct. 1985): 132-161.

is said that when this was brought against [al-Jubbā'ī], he stopped. This is because [the Mu'tazilīs] obligate Him to be just between two likes and to do what is best (*aṣḥab*) to each one of them. Here, He did what was best according to them to one of the two but not to the other. This is not the place to elaborate on this. If the matter is like this, their assimilation of God to His creatures is vain.²³

In *The Sunnī Way* the shaykh also argues that an odious consequence of al-Ḥillī's Mu'tazilism is that God cannot be thanked because He is doing nothing more than fulfilling His obligations. This argument rests on the presupposition that gratitude is due only for blessings that exceed obligations. According to Ibn Taymiyya, God in al-Ḥillī's view is obligated to provide both worldly and religious blessings.²⁴ Moreover, God cannot make someone a believer, and so He cannot be thanked for that either. God's blessings in the hereafter consist in obligatory recompense just as an employer must pay an employee his wage or a debtor must pay off his debt. Thus, all is obligation for God, and He is not worthy of thanks for anything. Ibn Taymiyya understands al-Ḥillī to insinuate as well that humans are not worthy of praise, thanks or blame if God makes them do good or evil. Conversely, in al-Ḥillī's view one cannot say that God is blessing or testing when human authorities act justly or unjustly, respectively, because God is not making them behave in this manner. As the shaykh sees it, this undermines the proper attitude of thankfulness both to God and to other people that befits believers in all circumstances. To counter this the shaykh asserts that human beings have been naturally constituted to praise someone who does good and to blame one who does evil even if these acts are determined and created by God. God makes one person deserving of praise and reward and another deserving of punishment and blame according to His wise purpose.²⁵

In sum Ibn Taymiyya is unsympathetic to the sober Mu'tazilī free will theodicy in which God treats human beings with rigorous equality as

23. *Minhāj*, 3:198-9.

24. On this view in al-Ḥillī's thought, see Schmidtke, *Theology*, 109-115.

25. *Minhāj*, 3:131-7.

they freely choose their response to God's obligation and earn their just deserts. Ibn Taymiyya attacks the Mu'tazilīs both for obligating God to act according to a retributive ethic and for misconstruing the divine economy in such a way that makes God look foolish and undermines thankfulness to Him. These arguments were not new with Ibn Taymiyya but had been developed earlier by the Ash'arī tradition.²⁶

1.2 Ash'arī Divine Voluntarism

In the second type in Ibn Taymiyya's typology God's justice is voluntaristic: whatever God wills to do is just by virtue of the fact that it is God who wills it. This doctrine is that of al-Ash'arī and his successors the Ash'arī theologians, and Ibn Taymiyya finds it present in all four Sunnī schools of law.²⁷ The shaykh reports that in this view injustice is inherently impossible for God in the same way that it is impossible to combine two contradictories or put one body in two places at once. God would be just to do anything imaginable whose existence is possible. He is not under any kind of external obligation. God would be just to chastise the obedient or reward the disobedient. He may punish the children of unbelievers and the insane even if they have not sinned. He would not be unjust to punish someone even for his color or height. Ibn Taymiyya cites two arguments produced by the Ash'arīs for their position. First, injustice means acting freely in someone else's property. In the case of God everything is His property. So by definition it is impossible for God to be unjust. Second, injustice means opposing a command that must be obeyed. Now God is not subject to the command of any other. So injustice cannot be ascribed to God.²⁸

26. Most of the arguments above may also be found, for example, in the Ash'arī Kalām theology handbook of al-Shahrastānī, *Kitāb nihāyatu 'l-iqdām fī 'ilmi 'l-kalām*, ed. and trans. by Alfred Guillaume (London: Oxford University, 1934), 397-411 (Arabic), 126-131 (English).

27. *Minhāj*, 3:20; 'Ādil, JR 122-3, 127; cf. *Abū Dharr*, MF 18:138 and *Jabr*, MF 8:506.

28. *Minhāj*, 1:134, 1:452, 2:305-6, 3:20-2, 3:40; 'Ādil, JR 121, 125, 127; *Jabr*, MF 8:506-7; *Abū Dharr*, MF 18:139, 152; *Nubuwwāt*, 143-5.

The Ash‘arī position is odious to Ibn Taymiyya because he believes that it portrays God acting like a fool and one who is insane.²⁹ Also, he judges inadequate the definitions of injustice as freely acting in someone else’s property or being subject to commands. He argues, “A human being may rightly act freely in the property of another and not be unjust, and he may wrongly act freely in his [own] property and be unjust. Injustice of the servant against himself is frequent in the Qur‘ān.”³⁰ As for being subject to commands, the shaykh explains that even God has subjected Himself to His own ‘writing’ and ‘forbidding’: “God—Glory be to Him—has written mercy for Himself and forbidden injustice to Himself. He does not act in opposition to what He has written, and He does not do what He has forbidden.”³¹

Ibn Taymiyya also reports the Ash‘arī view that God will not do everything that is permissible for Him because God has said that He will not and because this information corresponds to His knowledge of what He will and will not do. God will not in fact punish children without sin and bring unbelievers into Paradise even though it would not be unjust of Him to do so. In Ash‘arism God has obligated Himself to sustain His promises given in revelation. Ibn Taymiyya does not always explain why he finds this inadequate to guarantee God’s reliability.³² In one text, however, he argues that a God who has arbitrary choice in possibility, if not in actuality, cannot be known to be reliable in the information that He gives. The shaykh retorts that the Ash‘arīs allow that God could send anyone with whatever message He wills, even someone who commits grave sins.³⁴

Ibn Taymiyya then turns the Ash‘arī denial of God’s purposive activity against them to undermine their foundations for prophetic

29. *Nubuwwāt*, 144-5.

30. *Abū Dharr*, MF 18:145.

31. *Abū Dharr*, MF 18:145.

32. *Abū Dharr*, MF 18:148; *Nubuwwāt*, 143; *Minhāj*, 1:451-2.

33. As in *Abū Dharr*, MF 18:148; and in *Minhāj*, 1:451-2.

34. *Nubuwwāt*, 145-6.

reliability. He cites the theologians al-Ash‘arī, Abū Bakr al-Bāqillānī (d. 1013), Ibn Fūrak (d. 1015) and the Ḥanbalī Abū Ya‘lā (d. 1066) as arguing that a God who is powerful must confirm the truthfulness of His prophets and that this can be done only through miracles. The shaykh says that this contradicts the Ash‘arī notion that God may do anything that He wills. Also, God cannot establish a miracle as a sign of the truthfulness of a messenger if He does not do one thing on account of another, that is, if He does not act for purposes. Ibn Taymiyya reports as well that al-Juwaynī adopted a different strategy. The Ash‘arī theologian claims that knowledge of the truthfulness of prophets to whom God gives a miracle is necessary. The shaykh replies that this argument works only if it is known that God is one who does things for wise purposes. Otherwise, there is no way of knowing that God has done something to indicate something else. It must be known necessarily that God does things for wise purposes before one can recognize necessarily that God confirms His messengers through miracles.³⁵

In another text Ibn Taymiyya himself establishes the reliability of prophets on the basis of necessary knowledge that God acts for wise purposes. God’s wise purpose, justice and mercy are known by reason.³⁶ Rational proof of God’s wise purpose is found in the dazzling divine wisdom that is evident in all created things, as for example in the perfect placement of the body parts.³⁷ God must act according to His wise purpose, and, “His wise purpose necessitates that He make the truthfulness of the prophets obvious and support them.”³⁸

In effect Ibn Taymiyya’s critique of the Ash‘arīs’ view of justice reduces to upbraiding them for denying that God’s justice entails some kind of rationality. A God who could so radically violate the order of

35. *Nubuwwāt*, 148-9, 361-2, 371-3.

36. *Nubuwwāt*, 349-353, 361.

37. *Nubuwwāt*, 356-7.

38. *Nubuwwāt*, 349. For this point see also *Ḥasana*, MF 14:271; and *Minhāj*, 3:91-9, 3:226-8. In *Minhāj*, 3:97, Ibn Taymiyya adds that it would be an attribute of imperfection for God to confirm a liar.

retribution as to punish believers for their belief or make liars into prophets cannot be called just and cannot by His very nature establish a relationship with humankind based on promise and trust.

1.3 Ibn Taymiyya's Theodicy of Optimism

This brings us to the third type in Ibn Taymiyya's typology and his own view of God's justice. Here, Ibn Taymiyya's optimism becomes readily apparent. He sometimes begins by defining injustice rather than justice. Ibn Taymiyya's standard definition of injustice (*zulm*) is putting something in other than its place. The shaykh traces this definition to the linguist Abū Bakr b. al-Anbārī (d. 940).³⁹ He also attributes this to "many of the Sunnīs, scholars of prophetic traditions, and people of rational thought."⁴⁰ Beyond this he does not give names, but al-Ghazālī for example defines justice as putting things in their places when outlining the wise placement of the body parts as a sign of the orderliness of God's creation in his book *The Most Radiant Sense (Al-Maḡṣad al-asnā)*.⁴¹ The concept of justice as putting things in their places is also found in the earlier Muslim theologian al-Māturīdī (d. 944).⁴²

Ibn Taymiyya does not clearly define the rationality of God's justice. In a context not dealing explicitly with theological views of justice, he characterizes God's justice as beneficence (*ihsān*) to human beings in such a way that everything that God creates is beneficence giving Him the right to be praised.⁴³ This gives no content to divine justice

39. *Minhāj*, 1:139; *Jabr*, MF 8:507; and *Abū Dharr*, MF 18:145. For the connection to Ibn al-Anbārī, see 'Ādil, JF 124, 129.

40. *Jabr*, MF 8:507.

41. See the discussion of the divine name 'Just' (*al-'Adl*) in al-Ghazālī, *Al-Maḡṣad al-asnā fī sharḥ ma'ānī asmā' Allāh al-ḥusnā*, ed. Fadlou A. Shehadi (Beirut: Dar el-Machreq, 1982), 105-9; English translation: Al-Ghazālī, *The Ninety-Nine Beautiful Names of God: al-Maḡṣad al-asnā fī sharḥ asmā' Allāh al-ḥusnā*, trans. David B. Burrell and Nazih Daher (Cambridge, UK: The Islamic Texts Society, 1995), 92-96.

42. Meric J. Pessagno, "The uses of Evil in Maturidian Thought," *Studia Islamica* 60 (1984): 59-82, especially 68-9; and Abū Mansūr al-Māturīdī, *Kitāb al-tawḥīd*, ed. Faḥ Allah Khulayf (Alexandria: Dār al-jāmi'at al-miṣriyya, n.d.), 97.

43. MF 8:31.

except that what is is good and praiseworthy. In the justice passages Ibn Taymiyya defines divine justice as God putting everything in its place. This includes connotations of retribution but not exclusively so. Following is one of his more extended definitions:

Injustice is putting something in other than its place (*wad' al-shay' fī ghayr mawḍi'ihī*). Justice is putting everything in its place. He—Glory be to Him—is a wise arbiter and just, putting things in their places. He does not put anything except in its place, which corresponds to it and which wise purpose and justice require. He does not differentiate between two likes, and He does not equate two different things. He punishes only whoever deserves punishment and puts it in its place on account of the wise purpose and justice in that. As for the people of righteousness and piety (*taqwā*), He does not punish them at all.⁴⁴

Apart from the tautology of defining 'justice' as putting something in its place as "wise purpose and justice require," the text carries an appeal to an intuitive sense of retribution. Elsewhere, the shaykh claims that it is known by the natural constitution (*fiṭra*) that it is not permissible for God in His justice, wisdom and mercy to punish those who do good works and raise the iniquitous to the highest rank.⁴⁵ Similarly, he quotes, "Whoever does deeds of righteousness and is a believer will not fear injustice or curtailment (*ḥaḍman*)" (Q. 20:112), and he explains that 'curtailment' is reducing one's good deeds, and 'injustice' is making one responsible for the evil deeds of another. Only those who sin will be punished in the hereafter even though God may also pardon some.⁴⁶ Other verses he quotes along these lines include: "Indeed, God is not unjust to so much as the weight of an ant" (Q. 4:40), "That no one burdened bear the burden of

44. 'Ādil, JR 123-4.

45. *Nubuwwāt*, 145. Cf. 'Ādil, JR 125, 128; and *Minhāj*, 1:139. Note also *Nubuwwāt*, 42-3, where Ibn Taymiyya explains that God grants recompense in this world in accord with wise purpose and benefit and that God punishes each disobedient people according to His wise purpose and what is fitting for them.

46. *Jabr*, MF 8:507; *Abū Dharr*, MF 18:141-4, 146; *Nubuwwāt*, 144.

another, and that the human has only that for which he has made an effort” (Q. 53:38-9), and “Whoever does good equal to the weight of a small ant will see it, and whoever does evil equal to the weight of a small ant will see it” (Q. 99:7-8).⁴⁷ These last two verses suggest a rigorous standard of retribution. However, Ibn Taymiyya adds that God is also merciful to many people without regard to their deeds and that profit may accrue to a person from God’s grace and mercy as well as from the invocation and deeds of others.⁴⁸

The upshot of these comments is that justice for Ibn Taymiyya means putting reward and punishment in their proper places, where the ‘place’ of something is not clearly defined. For the most part, however, it appears that the wicked are punished while the righteous are not. Yet, retribution is not absolute and another rationality—that of God’s mercy—sometimes comes into play such that punishment for bad deeds does not always ensue. Even though Ibn Taymiyya does not clearly explain the rationality of God’s justice, he optimistically believes that human beings will recognize that everything in the world is just right.

Now, in view of Ibn Taymiyya’s conviction that God creates all things, it might be asked how some people become places fitting for punishment. How is it that human beings end up in the fix of needing to be punished? Ibn Taymiyya’s justice passages generally do not broach this question, but he does attribute God’s creation of evil deeds to an unspecified divine wise purpose in his *Rule*, the text mentioned earlier to which Henri Laoust did not have access.⁴⁹

Ibn Taymiyya’s *Rule* opens with two consecutive versions of the justice typology that has just been outlined above. The treatise then moves

47. ‘*Ādil*, JR 126; *Jabr*, MF 8:507; *Abū Dharr*, 18:142; *Minhāj*, 1:135-8. These references include additional quranic verses of this kind.

48. ‘*Ādil*, JR 126; *Abū Dharr*, 18:142-3.

49. Ibn Taymiyya does broach the problem of the origin of evil and God’s wise purpose in bringing it about much more directly in other texts, that is, in texts not dealing with divine justice. Analysis of these passages is found in Chapter Five of Hoover, “An Islamic Theodicy.”

to a defense of God against the charge of doing bad and evil deeds. Ibn Taymiyya’s wordy argument focuses very little on the causes of evil but extols the goodness of what God does at length. Only the central points of this defense will be given here.

To begin Ibn Taymiyya explains that God makes humans commit evil and unjust acts for a wise purpose. He does not explain what this wise purpose is but observes instead that this is a matter of God justly putting things in their places.⁵⁰ The shaykh supports his point by noting that human artisans do the same thing in placing defective raw materials in places properly befitting them.

When the artisan takes a crooked board, a broken stone and an imperfect brick, he puts them in a place befitting them and becoming of them. From him this is just, upright and correct. He is praiseworthy even if there is a crook and a fault in them by virtue of which they are blameworthy. Whoever takes disgusting things (*khabā’ith*) and puts them in the place that befits them, this is wise and just. Foolishness and injustice are only that he places them in other than their place. Whoever places a turban on the head and sandals on the feet has placed each thing in its place. He has not been unjust to the sandals since this is their place becoming of them. Thus, He—Glory be to Him—places a thing only in its place. This is only just, and He does only good. He is only beneficent, liberal and merciful.⁵¹

After this affirmation of the justice of all that God does, Ibn Taymiyya states in the *Rule* that what God has created is better than what He has not created. God creates only good, which is defined as “that whose existence is better than its nonexistence.”⁵² God does not will and create evil, which is “the existence of everything whose nonexistence is better than its existence.”⁵³ The shaykh explains that the terms good (*khayr*) and evil (*sharr*) are used most commonly in their comparative senses: “Good is

50. ‘*Ādil*, JR 130.

51. ‘*Ādil*, JR 130.

52. ‘*Ādil*, JR 130-1 (quote on 131).

53. ‘*Ādil*, JR 131.

what is better than something else, and evil is what is more evil than something else. Good and evil are in degrees (*darajāt*).⁵⁴ He then notes that the evil that God creates is good by virtue of God's wise purpose and its existence in general is better than its nonexistence. Created evil is only perceived to be evil when compared to something else, and it is only harmful to some people.⁵⁵

In the *Rule* Ibn Taymiyya affirms at some length that God is just and wise in that He chastises and punishes human beings only for the sins that they commit. The shaykh explains that God does not recompense, chastise, destroy, withdraw blessing and take vengeance except on account of sins and evil deeds. He adds, moreover, that the aim of God's chastisement in some cases, as in the verse, "Indeed, We seized them with chastisement, but they did not abase themselves before their Lord, and they were not humble" (Q. 23:76), is to bring about humility and repentance.⁵⁶ The shaykh leaves off this discussion of God's retribution without addressing the root reasons for human disobedience. Instead, he states that his objective is to emphasize that God always does what is best: "The point here is that the existence of everything that the Lord does and creates is better than its nonexistence. It also is better than something else, that is, [better] than an existent other than it that could be supposed to be existent instead of it."⁵⁷ A few lines later in the *Rule*, Ibn Taymiyya further elaborates the necessity for God to do the best:

To the Lord—Exalted is He—is the highest similitude (cf. Q. 16:60). He is higher than any other, having a greater right to praise and laudation than everything other than Him, most worthy of the attributes of perfection and the farthest from the attributes of imperfection. It is impossible that the creature be qualified with a perfection in which there is no imperfection. [Conversely], the Lord is qualified only with the perfection in which there is no imperfection. When He commands

54. *ʿĀdil*, JR 133.

55. *ʿĀdil*, JR 134.

56. *ʿĀdil*, JR 134-6.

57. *ʿĀdil*, JR 136.

His servant to do the finest (*al-aḥsan*) and the best (*al-khayr*), it is impossible that He Himself do [anything] but the finest and the best. Doing the finest and the best is praised and is a perfection in which there is no imperfection. He has a greater right to praise and perfection in which there is no imperfection than any other.⁵⁸

Here Ibn Taymiyya roots God's doing the best possible in the quranic injunction to ascribe to God the highest similitude and in the rational necessity of ascribing to God the highest humanly conceivable perfection. Moreover, he argues, God Himself must act in a manner at least as worthy of the wholly beneficial dictates of His own command that He has given humanity. Following these arguments, the shaykh supports his claim that God necessarily does what is best with several quranic references, including, "In Your hand is the good (*khayr*). Truly, You are Powerful over everything" (Q. 3:26), "God has sent down the best discourse (*aḥsana al-ḥadīth*)" (Q. 39:23), and "Who made good everything He created" (Q. 32:7).⁵⁹

To sum up thus far Ibn Taymiyya's typological discussions of God's justice show clearly that he is an optimist in theodicy. He maintains that this world as a whole is entirely good and just. Moreover, this is the best of all possible worlds that God could have created because God in his perfection necessarily creates the best.

2.0 Ibn Taymiyya on God's Power and al-Ghazālī's Best of All Possible Worlds

We turn now to face the danger that Ibn Taymiyya's optimism presents to God's power. The idea that God in his perfection and justice creates the best possible world easily suggests that God could create no world other than this. For this reason Ibn Taymiyya in his various three-fold justice typologies expends considerable effort defending God's power and freedom to do other than what God does in fact do. He

58. *ʿĀdil*, JR 136.

59. *ʿĀdil*, JR 137.

maintains that God has power to commit injustice even if God does not actually do so. He asserts, “[God] has put everything in its place despite His power to do the opposite of that. He—Glory be to Him—acts by His free choice and His will. He has a right to praise and laudation for being just and not unjust.”⁶⁰ Whereas the Ash‘arīs say that injustice is inherently impossible for God, Ibn Taymiyya argues that divine injustice is possible (*maqḍūr* and *mumkin*). God could commit injustice but chooses not to, and this makes Him praiseworthy because praise is due only to one who chooses not to do injustice, not to one for whom it is inherently impossible.⁶¹

Along the same lines, the shaykh speaks of God’s self-obligation not to commit injustice. He bases this on a tradition in which God says, “O My servants! I have forbidden injustice to Myself.”⁶² Ibn Taymiyya explains that this implies that injustice is possible for God. If God has forbidden something to Himself, it must have been possible beforehand. Otherwise, the tradition would mean, “I have informed about Myself that what is not possible is not from Me.”⁶³ Ibn Taymiyya rejects this interpretation as useless and adds that it does not elicit praise.⁶⁴

Ibn Taymiyya also expresses concern to uphold God’s power and freedom in three comments on the dictum, “There is nothing in possibility more wonderful than what is (*laysa fī al-imbkān abda’ mimma kān*),” which has its roots in al-Ghazālī’s magnum opus *Revivification of the Religious Sciences* (*Ihyā’ ‘ulūm al-dīn*).⁶⁵ In *Theodicy in Islamic Thought*

60. ‘Ādil, JR 129.

61. *Minhāj*, 1:135; *Abū Dharr*, MF 18:146.

62. This tradition is found in the collection of Muslim 4674, *Al-Birr wa al-ṣila wa al-ādāb*, *Taḥrīm al-zulm*.

63. *Abū Dharr*, MF 18:144.

64. *Abū Dharr*, MF 18:144; *Minhāj*, 1:135-7, 1:451-3; *Jabr*, MF 8:509.

65. Ibn Taymiyya’s three comments are found in MF 2:213; MF 8:399; and ‘Ādil, JR 142.

In *Ihyā’ ‘ulūm al-dīn* (Beirut: Dār al-ma’rifā, n.d.), 4:258 (in *Kitāb al-tawḥīd wa al-tawakkul*), al-Ghazālī writes, “There is nothing in possibility fundamentally better (*aḥsan*) than [what God divides out], nor more complete, nor more perfect.” In *Kitāb al-implā’ fī ishkalāt al-Ihyā’*, a defense of the *Ihyā’ ‘ulūm al-dīn*, he writes, “There is

Eric Ormsby provides a history and analysis of the controversy that ensued from this saying. A brief look at Ormsby’s study is relevant here in order to assess the historical significance of Ibn Taymiyya’s comments.⁶⁶

After an examination of the origins of this dictum in al-Ghazālī’s writings, Ormsby’s second chapter surveys various commentators on it from the time of al-Ghazālī down to the nineteenth century. The relatively few scholars who comment on the dictum up to the mid-fourteenth century usually object to it on the grounds that, in addition to dabbling too much in Sufism and philosophy, al-Ghazālī limits God’s power. In this earlier period, the only figure Ormsby cites who approves the saying is the Sufi Ibn ‘Arabī. From the mid-fourteenth century onward, however, there is a marked shift toward accepting the dictum, and in the fifteenth century it is subjected to major debate.

In the third through fifth chapters, Ormsby surveys the basic objections to al-Ghazālī’s dictum and explains how al-Ghazālī’s defenders overcame these. Ormsby sums up the viewpoint of al-Ghazālī’s defenders as follows. The world is perfect and just at every moment of its existence. Yet it is also contingent; things could be other than they are, but the divine wisdom determines what will and will not be. Ormsby points out that the challenge of theodicy “is to assert the necessary rightness of things as they are, but to do so in a way that they are seen as proceeding from God’s will, wisdom, and power, and not from a necessity of His nature.”⁶⁷ He concludes that in the Islamic theodicy of al-Ghazālī and his defenders necessity finally rests in divine wisdom.⁶⁸

Ibn Taymiyya does not appear as a participant in Ormsby’s account

= nothing in possibility more wonderful (*abda’*) than the form of this world, nor better arranged, nor more perfectly (*akmal*) made” (in *Mulḥaq al-Ihyā’* printed with *Ihyā’ ‘ulūm al-dīn*, 5:13-41, at p. 35).

66. Eric L. Ormsby, *Theodicy in Islamic Thought: The Dispute over al-Ghazālī’s “Best of all Possible Worlds”* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984).

67. Ormsby, *Theodicy*, 264.

68. Ormsby, *Theodicy*, 259-264.

of the above debate, and the brevity of the shaykh's three comments on al-Ghazālī's dictum indicates that it did not exercise him greatly. However, what is probably the latest of Ibn Taymiyya's three comments does place him among the early supporters of the dictum since he lived in the early fourteenth century just as it began to gain more widespread acceptance.

In two mentions of al-Ghazālī's dictum Ibn Taymiyya does not refer to al-Ghazālī by name. In one of these the context is criticism of Ibn 'Arabī for limiting God's power to nothing more than the power to create what exists. Ibn Taymiyya then notes in passing that most people deny the dictum, and it is clear that he does as well.⁶⁹ In a second mention, he rejects the dictum as of a piece with the philosophers' idea that the Creator is necessitating in His essence and that what exists is the only thing possible.⁷⁰ In both comments, Ibn Taymiyya wishes to maintain that God has power to do more than He actually does.

Ibn Taymiyya gives al-Ghazālī's dictum closer attention at the end of his *Rule*. This mention is probably the latest of the three because this treatise dates from the last two years of Ibn Taymiyya's life.⁷¹ He explains that some scholars reject the saying in order to protect God's power, and he agrees that God indeed has power to create other than this world. However, he notes that there is another way to interpret this:

[The dictum] could mean that no better (*aḥsan*) than this [world] or no more perfect (*akmal*) than this is possible (*yumkin*). This is not a defamation of power. Rather, it has established His power [to do] other than what He has done. However, it says, "What He has done is better and more perfect than what He has not done." This ascribes to Him—Glory be to Him—generosity, liberality and

69. MF 2:213.

70. MF 8:399.

71. The copyist's heading of 'Ādil, JR 121, says that it is "among the things [Ibn Taymiyya] composed in his final detention in the citadel in Damascus." This places it between 1326 and his death in 1328.

beneficence. He—Glory be to Him—is the most generous. No more generous (*akram*) [being] than He can be conceived.⁷²

Thus Ibn Taymiyya accepts al-Ghazālī's dictum on the condition that God could create other than what He does. However, what God does create is the best of all possible worlds because He is the most perfect and generous being imaginable.

Conclusion

From the above analysis there is little doubt that Henri Laoust's brief note of Ibn Taymiyya's optimism many years ago is accurate. Given Ibn Taymiyya's on-going reputation as a polemical and anti-rationalist traditionalist, this may come as a surprise to some. Nonetheless, Ibn Taymiyya does follow in the train of al-Ghazālī and other eminent Muslim thinkers who affirm that God creates all existents with perfect justice such that this world is the best possible. Additionally, Ibn Taymiyya appears to be among the earlier supporters of the controversial Ghazālian dictum, "There is nothing in possibility more wonderful than what is." As with numerous later supporters of this saying, Ibn Taymiyya defends God's power to create other than this world even though God in His perfection chooses to create this, the best of all possible worlds.

72. 'Ādil, JR 142.