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# A Modified Free-Will Defense: A Structural and Theistic Free-Will Defense as a Response to James Sterba

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**Abstract:** In his book *Is a Good God Logically Possible?*, James Sterba argues that the Plantingian free-will defense, which reconciles the existence of a good and omnipotent God with the existence of evil, is a failed argument when it comes to the terrible evils in the world. This study discusses that Sterba's claim is invalid when Plantinga's free-will defense is modified with a structural perspective. In order to reconcile the structural and inevitable possibility of evil with God's moral imperatives, a structural free-will defense was complemented by an Islamic moral theology that Mu'tazila and its great scholar Qādi Abd al-Jabbar advanced. Such a modified free-will defense can show that the existence of all evil, including terrible ones, is still compatible with a good and omnipotent God.

**Keywords:** God; moral; morality; evil; theism; Mu'tazila; James Sterba; Qādi Abd al-Jabbar; justice



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## 1. Introduction

The problem of evil, the existence of evil despite God's omnipotence and impeccable goodness, is a puzzle that is constantly on the agenda in the contemporary philosophy of religion. This is so because atheists base their most fundamental objections to the existence of a perfect and good God on the persistence of evil. How could a good God allow humans to suffer evil that was not caused by their actions? In his book *Is a Good God Logically Possible?*, James Sterba takes this old and now prevalent debate into a new context.

The free-will defense of Plantinga (Plantinga [1974] 2001) has been accepted as a widely agreed answer to the logical problem of evil in contemporary philosophy (Sterba 2019, p. V). He developed this theory in response to J. Mackie's claim that God cannot be both omnipotent and unable to create a universe containing only moral goodness (Mackie 1982, p. 154). For Plantinga, the coexistence of God and evil logically does not pose a problem because the moral goodness of our actions depends on our freedom to perform them. The same freedom allows us to commit evil deeds. For God to create a morally good world, there must be people who are free to do good and evil (Plantinga [1974] 2001, p. 31). In his recent work, Sterba developed a new critique of Plantinga's free-will defense. Although he found Plantinga's logical solution to the problem of evil impressive, Sterba argued that the problem of evil is basically an ethical problem and, therefore, should be solved with an ethical perspective. In this vein, Sterba argued that Plantinga's free will defense is a failed theory from an ethical point of view. Underlining that the problem of evil in contemporary philosophy should be discussed not as a logical or epistemological<sup>1</sup> problem but as an ethical problem (Sterba 2019, p. 5), Sterba drew a new and instructive route to this very old debate. This new route compels theists studying philosophy, such as I am, to consider new possible answers to the problem of evil within sources of ethics.

## 2. Discussion and Argument

In this study, focused only on the "There is no Free-Will Defense" (Sterba 2019, p. 11) claim, which forms the first chapter of Sterba's book as well as its backbone. In this part, Sterba debated the problem of evil as a moral discussion. Here, Sterba's first and foremost

critique was that the amount and degree of moral evil cannot be justified in Plantinga's free-will defense. In conjunction with the first, his second critique was that Plantinga's argument that the existence of God and the existence of evil are logically compatible is a failure when it comes to significant and terrible evils (Sterba 2019, pp. 11–12).

Sterba distinguished between two things here: significant freedoms and additional freedoms. Accordingly, God not interfering to guarantee the significant freedom of humans, for example, in the form of fundamental rights and freedoms, is a divine failure, while Him not interfering to guarantee additional freedoms is a requirement of existing free will. For Sterba, the problem of evil in this context is not related to additional freedoms but a moral problem posed by significant freedoms. As understood by Sterba, Plantinga's free-will defense is a failed defense as it fails to justify why God allows the use of some significant freedoms when they cause horrendous evils (Sterba 2019, p. 12). Indeed, in Plantinga's defense, God allows evil in order to create the free will. However, when God permits terrible evil, some significant freedoms are destroyed, resulting in the minimization, not the maximization, of free will. Sterba put it this way: "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). In Plantinga's defense, God does not do this and therefore such a defense does not seem to be a genuine free will defense.

The first question I face here is whether the free-will defense is still an adequate one, given the amount and degree of evil. The second question is how horrendous evils in which any significant freedom is violated can continue to be morally defensible in logical harmony with the existence of God. Sterba thinks that Plantinga's free-will defense fails to answer these two questions. I agree with Sterba on this point. However, my disagreement with Sterba is limited to the fact that Plantinga's free-will defense is an incomplete one.<sup>2</sup> This incompleteness is related to Plantinga's discussion of the issue from a narrower perspective, keeping it only within the limits of modal logic. However, unlike Sterba, I believe that the issue of horrendous evil can be explained in the context of the free-will defense while remaining ethical.

What I proposed here is a modification of Plantinga's free-will defense. This modification occurs in two ways. The first is related to the understanding of the free-will defense as a structural theory, which rejects Sterba's first criticism that the degree and amount of evil cannot be justified by the free-will defense. My second modification suggests that the structural free-will defense theory must be complemented with theistic moral content. Such a modification rejects the second criticism of Sterba that God does not prevent significant evils so that the existence of God's omnipotence and significant evils is logically incompatible with each other. Here, for the first modification, I refer to the idea of structure in sociology, and for the second modification, I refer to the views of the Mu'tazila school<sup>3</sup>, which philosophically discussed the problem of evil in Islamic theology for the first time, and especially by its top moral theorist, Qādi Abd al-Jabbar<sup>4</sup> (d. 1024). My aim from these two modifications was to give a positive answer to Sterba's question: "Whether or not an all-good God who is also presumed to be all-powerful is logically possible given the degree and amount of moral evil that exists in the world?" (Sterba 2019, p. 1).

Before proceeding with the explanation of my thesis, I need to explain the probable reason why Plantinga's free-will defense cannot respond to Sterba's criticisms.

### 3. A Reappraisal of Plantinga's Free-Will Defense

The weakness of Plantinga's free-will defense against Sterba's first criticism is related to its limitations rather than its substance. Plantinga and Sterba treat free will from two different perspectives. Where Plantinga focused on free will from a general perspective irrelevant to specific cases, Sterba focused on free will from a particular person's perspective. Indeed, Plantinga says:

"What is relevant to the Free Will Defense is the idea of *being free with respect to an action*. If a person is free with respect to a given action, then he is free to perform that action and free to refrain from performing it . . . It is within his power, at the

time in question, to take or perform the action and within his power to refrain from it.”<sup>5</sup>

This perspective of Plantinga, which takes into account the freedom to do as well as the choice not to do, explains the possibility of human moral actions. It is the “freedom to refrain from performing evil” that makes moral acts possible for human beings. Otherwise, the choices of human beings become a necessity, not a moral act. However, this explanation does not refer to any moral implications of the evils that a free person will cause (Plantinga [1974] 2001, p. 31). In other words, what is missing in Plantinga’s defense is the perspective of the victim, who is exposed to evil actions of humans who exercise their free will. Plantinga realized that his thesis explains nothing about the victims and their sufferings. His following sentences seem to confirm this understanding:

“Neither a defense nor a theodicy, of course, gives any hint as to what God’s reason for some specific evil—the death or suffering of someone close to you, for example—might be. And there is still another function—a sort of pastoral function” . . . Probably neither will enable someone to find peace with himself and with God in the face of the evil the world contains. But then, of course, neither is intended for that purpose” (Plantinga [1974] 2001, pp. 28–29).

Similarly, Plantinga states that to address the specific evils that befall us would be to address a different dimension of the problem of evil:

“ . . . suffering and misfortune may nonetheless constitute a problem for the theist; but the problem is not that his beliefs are logically or probabilistically incompatible. The theist may find a religious problem in evil; in the presence of his own suffering or that of someone near to him he may find it difficult to maintain what he takes to be the proper attitude towards God. Faced with great personal suffering or misfortune, he may be tempted to rebel against God, to shake his fist in God’s face, or even to give up belief in God altogether. But this is a problem of a different dimension. Such a problem calls, not for philosophical enlightenment, but for pastoral care.” (Plantinga [1974] 2001, pp. 63–64).

The perspective subjected to specific evils, which I call the victim perspective, has no place in Plantinga’s free-will defense; in addition, it is only associated with “pastoral care”. However, Sterba insisted that this perspective be included in the defense of free will. Sterba’s insistence on the need to guarantee important freedoms for everyone, including victims, shows that he incorporates the victim’s perspective. Thus, Sterba logically rejects the exclusion of a particular person whose significant freedom is not guaranteed in a particularly terrible event in Plantinga’s free-will defense. According to him, a free-will defense must also include an explanation for those whose significant freedoms have been usurped (Sterba 2019, p. 26).

The possible question here then might be: What does the free-will defense mean for the particular victim who has to suffer terrible evil because of a freely chosen action by a free agent? The fact that Plantinga leaves out the perspective of a particular victim by saying that this is “a different dimension” should not allow us to exhaust any alternative interpretations of the Plantingian defense. Hence, Sterba’s conclusion “there is no free-will defense” seems to be valid only within the confines of Plantinga’s defense.

What kind of theory would that be if I tried to extend the free-will defense to the ability, unlike Plantinga, to include both perspectives? In other words, how is it possible to transform the free-will defense into a theory that both explains the acts of free agents and offers a convincing explanation for the victims’ suffering? I answer this question in a way that can satisfy both of Sterba’s criticisms. As in the name of the title “there is no free-will defense”, Sterba rightly stated that Plantinga’s free-will defense cannot justify a particular significant evil. Sterba explained this by stating that the distribution of freedom in instances of significant evil is morally unacceptable:

“What happens is that the freedom of the assaulters, a freedom no one should have, is exercised at the expense of the freedom of their victims not to be assaulted, an important freedom that everyone should have.” (Sterba 2019, p. 13).

Sterba’s second critique of an immoral distribution of free will, given the amount and degree of freedom, is about God’s role in that distribution. At this point, Sterba drew an analogy between a just state and God, stating that just states limit the freedom of the potential aggressor due to the harm they can inflict on innocents (Sterba 2019, p. 13). Accordingly, he proposed that we should expect God to do more than a just state, which is a moral duty for an omnipotent God (Sterba 2019, pp. 28–29). However, this hope appears to be a clearly “failing” hope in the examples of people who have suffered the terrible evils that Sterba gives in his book (Sterba 2019, pp. 20–24). It is here that Sterba questioned, with a Humean reproach<sup>6</sup>, why does God fail this hope? I think it is possible to reformulate Sterba’s standpoint here with the following question: How could an all good, all just, and all-powerful God, provider and giver of the freedom to all of us, allow humans to suffer from an evil that was not caused by their free actions? In terms of God’s moral status, it seems imperative for a free-will defense to give a morally adequate answer to this question.

For this, I want to explain what it means to think of free will structurally, which is the first and fundamental step of the two modifications I proposed to the free-will defense.

#### 4. Structural Understanding of Free-Will Defense

Such as Sterba, I confirmed that God permits a disproportionate use of freedom and its horrendous evil results (Sterba 2019, p. 23). However, I suggested that this divine permission should be understood as structural permission. I borrowed the idea of the structure that I used here from structural theory in sociology (see for example, Mayhew 1980, pp. 335–75) but in a simple way. In structural understanding, processes and practices, in general, are explained in terms of a structure that makes them meaningful. In structural theory, processes and practices are caused by structural determinants. Building on this understanding of the structure, I formulated my structural theory of free will. I argued that, rather than focusing on individual acts and their results, we should focus on the structure in which free will operates. Accordingly, structural free will refers to a standard and general structure in which all human actions occur. I reconstructed Plantinga’s free-will defense with a simple modification as “structural free-will defense”. The idea advocates free will as a possibility for all human beings but not the free will distributed among individuals. Therefore, issues such as how this possibility is realized through human actions and what proportion and amount of evil these actions cause became irrelevant to the structural free-will defense. The structural free-will defense cannot be criticized here by pointing out a specific freedom and a particular evil case because the structural free-will defense focuses on the structure in which good and bad actions become possible.

Since freedom has to be understood as a general opportunity in the structural free-will defense, the distinctions such as significant and insignificant freedom (Sterba 2019, p. 11) are inappropriate. Likewise, this defense does not distinguish between significant and insignificant evil (Sterba 2019, p. 15). Such distinctions are about individual actions and consequences, but structural free will is unrelated to the individuals. For this reason, the structural free will defense is unaffected by the consequences of individual actions and, therefore, cannot be overturned by individual instances of evil. In the structural free-will defense, there is no distinction between the person who uses their free will and the person harmed by this action. Evil is only related to structural free will as a general possibility. In this context, Sterba’s judgmental expressions such as “unacceptable”, “unjust”, “better”, or “morally defensible distribution of freedom” (Sterba 2019, pp. 15, 18–19) are not judgments that can be drawn from my structural free-will theory.

The other part of this structure is related to Sterba’s second critique; the existence of God and the existence of horrendous evil are logically incompatible. In the structural defense of free will, God is the creator of this structure. Just as structural free will has nothing to do with individual moral free will, God acts in harmony with this structure as

the creator of it. In other words, God, the creator of this structure, cannot be understood as one who dispenses free will to each individual for use in each particular action, thus openly permitting evil acts. God does not prefer one's freedom to another's freedom. God does not give somebody more significant freedom and deprive others of it. God allows individual human actions, whether good or bad, to take place, and this permission should be understood as general permission. God has revealed this structure in a way that guarantees the free action of everyone.<sup>7</sup>

In the structural free will defense, the logical possibility of everything is guaranteed. The possibility of evil is violated when the suffering of the victim is rendered impossible by divine intervention. In this case, the moral benefit of choosing not to commit evil disappears, as this destroys the most basic purpose of the creation of humankind as a separate being. Therefore, God cannot be held responsible for the moral consequences of any evil act of an individual who uses the freedom provided by this structure. How the individuals use this freedom is entirely up to them. In this context, Sterba's critique of why God does not intervene in evil but rather allows it (Sterba 2019, pp. 25–27) is not a relevant question given the structural understanding of free will. However, the moral justification for why God created such a structure and why God does not structurally interfere with human choices cannot be explained by the structural free will defense theory alone. In other words, if we confine the explanation of the existence of evil to the logical possibility of all, God's morality and creation become untenable. At this point, an analysis of the moral relationship between God and humankind is needed. This relationship can best be explained by remaining within theism. Therefore, the structural defense of free will should be complemented by a certain kind of Islamic moral theology.

### 5. A Theistic Ground in the Structural Free-Will Defense

First of all, it is worth noting that we do not encounter a discussion of the problem of evil per se in Islamic moral thought as in Western philosophy. The first philosophical question that began to emerge from the seventh century onward was not "does man have free-will?". Rather, it was a God-dependent question: "Does man have free-will against the divine will?" (Watt 1944, pp. 1–2). In the context of this question, the first place to look in Islamic thought is the Muslim speculative theology school Mu'tazila, which started to emerge in the eighth century (Cf. Hourani 1985, pp. 93–94, 256). This school engaged with the God-dependent context of the free-will debate in a purely rational way compared to its historical rivals.

I did not intend to present the free-will theory of the Mu'tazila school in all its details here. Building on Qādi's argument, I tried theistically to complement my response to Sterba's critiques. According to Sterba, the free-will defense in which free will is itself not promoted cannot be accepted as a valid free-will defense. However, Qādi would understand the promotion of free will not as the promotion of the amount and distribution of free will itself but as the promotion of the principle of justice. In other words, a possible contemporary Mu'tazilite free-will defense would be a free-will defense in which justice is promoted.

Before moving on to Qādi's arguments, we analyzed Sterba's claim on the promotion of freedom through his criticism of Plantinga. Plantinga's defense of free will was centered on the possibility of the existence of the moral good. Plantinga put it this way:

"A world containing creatures who are significantly free (and freely perform more good than evil actions) is more valuable, all else being equal, than a world containing no free creatures at all . . . He can't give these creatures the freedom to perform evil and at the same time prevent them from doing so." (Plantinga [1974] 2001, p. 30).

From this, Plantinga drew the following logical conclusion:

"The heart of the Free-Will Defense is the claim that it is possible that God could not have created a universe containing moral good (or as much moral good as this world contains) without creating one that also contained moral evil. And if

so, then it is possible that God has a good reason for creating a world containing evil.” (Plantinga [1974] 2001, p. 31).

Sterba affirmed Plantinga, stating that some evils in the world are understandable from his perspective. However, in the free-will defense, the existence of evil should not be justified by the existence of moral goodness alone. I agreed with Sterba on this point. However, as stated earlier, Sterba pointed to a different and more critical perspective: “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). For this reason, Sterba stated that significant freedom can only be possible by restricting insignificant freedoms, which is the behavior expected from an omnipotent God. I think that Sterba grounded this expectation by focusing on divine power. In this case, the moral relationship between God and humans becomes a relationship built on the omnipotence of God. Since Sterba focused on the divine power in the moral relationship between God and human, he rightly compared God to a just state. According to his comparison, God could prevent terrible evil much more easily than a just state could do, but He does not. Extending his examples, Sterba also compared God to fictional superheroes such as Superman, etc., questioning God’s non-intervention in dreadfully evil acts: “Why then, in the actual world, couldn’t God, like superheroes in our fictional world, be more involved in preventing evils that result in the loss of significant freedom for their victims?” (Sterba 2019, pp. 19–20).

Sterba justified the aim of promoting free will in the free-will defense with the existence of an asymmetrical power difference between God and human beings. Before proceeding with Mu’tazila, there is the historical projection of Sterba’s position in Islamic thought. Sterba’s power-oriented thinking of the God–human relationship is an askew repetition of the way of discussing human freedom in the Ash’ari school, which is the contemporary and opponent of the Mu’tazila school in Islamic thought and also has an essential place in Islamic moral theology. For the Ash’arites, the main reason why man’s free will is not given sufficient importance in the moral relationship between God and humans is that God could use His unlimited power in an unlimited way (Eş’ari 2017, pp. 65–75 and 85–95). Cf. (Hourani 1985, pp. 65–66, 118–19; Ozdemir 2001, pp. 250–51). However, Sterba appealed to the limitlessness of the divine power to increase human freedom. In other words, the way to promote human freedom is through the exercise of God’s unlimited power to limit human free action. But, this is quite irrational for the Mu’tazila, who argue free will in terms of God’s justice.

### 5.1. A Free-Will Defense with a Divine Justice Perspective

The Mu’tazilite free-will debate is a debate putting God’s justice at its center. The divine justice includes mainly two things in Qādi’s thought: 1. All the acts of God are good, He never commits evil acts; 2. God never neglects what He is supposed to do, such as rewarding His creations (Kadi Abdülcebbar 2017, p. 26). Cf. (Kadi Abdülcebbar 2013, vol. 1, p. 214). My structural free-will defense theory needed to operate on these theistic foundations. I elaborated on them more through Mu’tazila and Qādi.

#### 5.1.1. A Justice-Centered Free-Will Defense

In Mu’tazilite thought, God never wants or conducts evil. God is above all evil (Kadi Abdülcebbar 2013, vol. 2, p. 16). The only way to keep God away from evil is to understand evil as an outcome caused by human’s free will. The fact that man can be justly held responsible by God is only possible if God gives man free will. Since humans are held responsible for their free will, they are the creator of their own actions, whether significant or insignificant, good or bad (Kadi Abdülcebbar 2017, pp. 94–95). Qādi put this as the following principle: “The servants’ deeds are created by themselves, not by God” (Kadi Abdülcebbar 2017, p. 77).

The fact that humans are chiefly responsible for all of their own actions and God’s moral disinterest in individual acts of human beings are related to the moral relationship between God and human beings built on the principle of justice. A particular ontological

metaphysics between God and humans supports this relationship. In Islam, as in Judaism and Christianity, God is a being with absolute sovereignty and absolute power. The human under the divine sovereignty is an agent being morally tested by God. It is expressed in the Qur'an as follows: "He is the One Who created death and life in order to test which of you is best in deeds" (67:2). They cannot act independently of their ontological status as tested by God. However, this ontological commitment of humans to God does not determine how they will behave in this test. For whomever God is testing, it is sure that they will receive righteous rewards and punishments from God due to their relationship with the just God. Therefore, in this relationship, God is also morally responsible to give just responses to His servants (Attar 2010, p. 86; Güler 2016, pp. 37–55).

In the Qur'an, human freedom is treated as uninterrupted freedom, and the responsibility of a person for the consequences of an action depends on this uninterrupted character of freedom. For instance, in the Quran, God says:

"Say, O Prophet, "O humanity! The truth has surely come to you from your Lord. So whoever chooses to be guided, it is only for their own good. And whoever chooses to stray, it is only to their own loss. And I am not a keeper over you." (10:108)<sup>8</sup>.

This Quranic perspective supports Mu'tazila, as it understands that the freedom for any act is a necessary rational condition of human beings' moral responsibility (Kadi Abdülcebbar 2017, p. 85). Put differently, the moral responsibility of human beings can only be possible in the existence of the following condition: a person's free will is possible only when other persons are not helped by divine intervention. In this context, we can conclude that, in Mu'tazilite thought, if the free will is to be promoted on behalf of the free-will defense, unlike Sterba, it will not happen in the case where God intervenes in the free will of some people. If free will is to be promoted, this is only possible in the Mu'tazilite formula, in which the moral relationship between human's accountability and God's just responses is not violated. Every essential or insignificant intervention of God towards human freedom is not a promotion of freedom but rather a detrimental one for the Mu'tazila, who consider free will only in the context of divine justice. A God who interferes with human's free will cannot continue to hold humans accountable in a just way. If God occasionally intervened in human actions, there would be no point in divine condemnation and the questioning of it (Kadi Abdülcebbar 2013, vol. 2, p. 102). Qādi expressed this as follows:

"... the one who is compelled (mulja') not to do a bad or evil act does not perform it actually, because he/she is compelled, and not because it is evil. Yet, it was proved that deserving praise and award follows restraining from doing evil because it is evil, not for anything else..." Quoted by (Attar 2010, p. 93).

As can be understood from this excerpt, for Qādi, an action that will be the subject of divine moral judgment must be an act of complete free will and uninterrupted. This thought cancels out Sterba's strong expectation of divine intervention during one's plan to commit an evil act. In general, Mu'tazila is entirely alien to the discussion of free will independent from a justice-oriented relationship between God and humans. Sterba's advocacy of free will is not based on this kind of relationship and therefore easily suggests that God, such as a just state, must sometimes apply interventions in human actions in order to protect and promote people's freedoms. Yes, that is precisely what a just state does. A just state is responsible for the "unjust distribution of freedom" (Sterba 2019, p. 19). We rightfully expect the police to catch and punish the person before committing any terrible evil. While a divine intervention on free will displaces the justice and responsibility relationship between God and humans, there is no such relationship that can be displaced between the just state and the individual. A just state does not care whether a person is an absolute moral agent. Likewise, superheroes will not be concerned about it, as they are just focused on their strength and what they are capable of. Neither is it related to making

people morally liable. Qādi seemed to express this, at least for his own time: “No one but God can impose genuine moral obligations” (Kadi Abdülcebbar 2013, vol. 2, p. 318).

The Mu’tazilite justice-centered free-will defense needed combined with my structural free-will theory. First, Sterba’s statements should be reconfirmed as follows: “God has not chosen to secure the freedoms of those who are morally entitled to those freedoms by restricting others from exercising freedoms that they are not morally entitled to exercise” (Sterba 2019, p. 23). However, unlike Sterba’s thoughts, God has chosen not to interfere with individual human freedom. It should be understood as a structural non-intervention. This shows the moral justification of this non-intervention from the Mu’tazilite perspective of divine justice. Nevertheless, Sterba seemed to express from the outset that he would not buy this kind of justification because it is not related to the free-will defense. He says: “So if God is justified in permitting such moral evils, it has to be on grounds other than freedom . . . ” (Sterba 2019, p. 23). However, Mu’tazila did not distinguish the free-will defense from the justice of God. Furthermore, Sterba added,

“if there is a justification for the moral evil in the world that renders it compatible with the existence of God, it has to be in terms of securing some other good, or goods . . . If we are successful in finding such a justification, we will have a defense of the degree and amount of moral evil in the world. But it will not be a Free-Will Defense” (Sterba 2019, p. 23).

This judgment of Sterba is a result of his focus on the fact that the free-will defense can only be thought of as a defense in which freedom, as an amount and degree, is promoted. However, such as Mu’tazila, there is the structural defense of free will in which God’s justice as an amount and degree is promoted. In this way, while disassociating the existence of God and evil through the structural defense of free will, it is understood that God’s non-intervention in evil is a structural non-intervention rather than an individual one. This non-intervention is also justified through the moral relationship between God and humans, which appears only in theism. However, this should not be understood as a condition/cause of God’s Own justice. Otherwise, we might end up with an interpretation in which we accuse God of allowing evil only to do His justice.<sup>9</sup> Free will (non-intervention) and justice (intervention) are not in causal relations. Rather, they are two complementary graces in God’s relations with human beings. The simultaneous occurrence of these two blessings inevitably constitutes a violation of one of them. Therefore, they are complementary in the totality of the relationship between God and human beings. When we think in this totality, evil is not a condition/cause of God’s justice, but a possibility in free will.

In this way, the structural defense of free will can only be rationally defended in a totality in which no theistic elements, such as God’s justice, human responsibilities, and human ontological and metaphysical status against God, are overlooked. At this point, the example that Silvia Jonas used between a chess piece and a chess game is very useful in understanding the relationships between the existence of evil, the structural understanding of evil, and the theistic explanations of evil. She stated:

“Can we meaningfully imagine a chess piece, for example, one that plays the role of a rook, independently of a chess game? No, we cannot. This is because, in the absence of other pieces, a chessboard, and two players, we wouldn’t know how to think about its moves, its position, etc. In other words, we can only comprehend a chess piece like the rook in conjunction with all other constituents of the game, just like we can only understand the number three in relation to the rest of the natural-number-structure” (Jonas 2018, p. 162).

As in the case of the Jonas’ analogy, the free-will defense is not logically possible when it is isolated from its structure in which free will is exercised. In the structural free-will defense, the existence of an individual evil cannot be understood without the reference to the structural body of free will. This brings us to the logical possibility of all, either good or bad, the fundamental feature of the mundane life. In religion, the mundane life is not independent of God’s just rewards and just punishments. Otherwise, when these

two are not considered together, the question of God's morality arises, even if the free will created by God is understood. Ignoring the integrity of the theistic structure in interpreting evil will result in a failed interpretation of the relationship between the existence of evil and God.

### 5.1.2. Evil in Terms of God's Power

In Qādi's understanding, the fact that God is not associated with any evil and man is positioned as solely responsible for his evil acts shows that God cannot be blamed in two ways. First, because God is not responsible for the evil act, he cannot be blamed for it. Here, all responsibility belongs to the person with free will, as stated above. Second, God cannot be blamed for allowing or not intervening in evil acts. This issue is unrelated to the omnipotence of God for Qādi. He made an obvious statement by saying that divine will and divine power have nothing to do with evil: "When we describe God as just and wise, we mean that he never commits ugly acts, does not choose ugly deeds, does not violate what is obligatory for him, and everything he does is good" (Kadi Abdülcebbbar 2013, vol. 2, p. 8). Qadi understands that even though God does not perform evil actions does not mean that He is unable to perform them (Watt 1944, p. 81). Perhaps this is the subject closest to the problem of evil in the Islamic tradition as in Western philosophy. Qādi stated quite clearly the following:

"They said that if God could do ugly deeds, it would be obligatory for him to do it. We say: Not every person capable of evil has to do it. Do you not see that we sometimes sit even though we can stand and sometimes remain silent even though we can speak? How do you deduce that the omnipotent must do what is necessary in any case? For example, God can cause the apocalypse right now, but we cannot say that He is not able to do so just because He did not do it." (Kadi Abdülcebbbar 2013, vol. 2, p. 30).

He also said:

"Your Lord does not wrong anyone. If He cannot do this, it would not make sense for Him to boast of not doing oppression. Just as . . . it does not make sense for a disabled man to boast of not climbing walls and giving up raiding his neighbors' houses because he is not mighty, so is the situation here." (Kadi Abdülcebbbar 2013, vol. 2, pp. 30–32).

According to Qādi, God's inaction to perform evil is explained not as a weakness of divine power but as God's knowledge of the evil of evil acts and not being obliged to perform evil (Kadi Abdülcebbbar 2017, p. 80). The same is true of God's inaction in preventing a terrible evil. Again, we see that a power-centered moral relationship has not been established between God and humans. Therefore, both Hume's critique of the relationship between God and evil and Sterba's critique that, despite being omnipotent, God does not prevent terrible evil is unrelated in terms of God's power. As a matter of fact, according to Qādi, for instance, God cannot be held responsible for the burning of a child in a tandoor. It is not the act of "burning" created by God that should be blamed here; the one who is responsible is the person who brings him close to the fire or throws him into the tandoor (Kadi Abdülcebbbar 2013, vol. 2, p. 58). We also see that the Qur'an supports this perspective. For example, "that is because of what your hands have sent ahead, and because God is not tyrannical to the servants" (8: 51). Another verse says: "Whoever does good, it is to their own benefit. And whoever does evil, it is to their own loss. Your Lord is never unjust to His creation" (41:46). Qādi underlined that if God both makes man responsible for his actions and simultaneously intervenes in his actions simply because of His omnipotence, the test of humans will become absurd. Such a contradictory act of God would also make many of God's interactions with humans absurd, whereas God commands and prohibits, sends prophets commanding good and forbidding evil, and gives moral responses in the form of interrogation, reckoning, and punishment (Kadi Abdülcebbbar 2017, p. 85).

### 5.1.3. Evil and the Theory of *Aslah*

Another area where the idea of divine justice extends is the principle that God would not refrain from doing what was obligatory for Himself. What acts of God cannot be thought of as reluctant to do? This area is related to the theory of *aslah*, a well-known concept in Islamic moral theology. The word *aslah* means “the most appropriate, most useful, the best thing about the human” (Kadi Abdülcebbar 2013, vol. 1, p. 216). As the second way to promote freedom in the world, let us recall Sterba’s critique that God should restrict some significant freedoms, but He does not (Sterba 2019, p. 12). This criticism seems to be closely related to the theory of *aslah*, and it is possible to formulate the question as follows: Does God have to do what is best for His servants? The following statements of Qādi are highly relevant to this question:

“They said: Surely, the fact that God knows the evil and oppression in the life of this world, and that He has the power to prevent them, but does not prevent them, indicates that He has willed them. The thing that indicates this from the sensible world is this: Surely if the king does not prevent any evil that he knows from his people and army, although he has the power, this attitude indicates that he wants the evil to happen.” (Kadi Abdülcebbar 2013, vol. 2, p. 272).

Qādi answered this with an example:

“Because even though they know that Jews and Christians under the leadership of both imams and Muslims do not prevent them from going to synagogues and churches, it does not mean that they want them to continue . . . We do not find it appropriate that omnipotent God should prevent unbelievers from disbelief as long as they continue their responsibilities. Because here is the abolition of responsibility and the annulment of deserving praise and blame. How can their saying “God can prevent them” be true in this situation? He does not do this so that the responsibility would not be lifted and the reward and punishment would not be canceled.” (Kadi Abdülcebbar 2013, vol. 2, p. 274).

As seen, Qādi rejected the understanding of the theory of *aslah* as the expectation of God’s intervention in all kinds of evil. Let us recall here Sterba’s criticism of why God does not guarantee well-deserved rights by restricting undeserved rights (Sterba 2019, pp. 21–23). Qādi’s attitude towards *aslah* is also valid for this criticism of Sterba. Unlike Sterba, Qādi responded to this criticism of all kinds of rights that humans deserve or do not deserve, again within the scope of divine justice and human’s accountability (Aytepe 2017, pp. 242–44). Therefore, the issue of preventing terrible evil to guarantee deserved rights is not a duty of God.

Nevertheless, Qādi limited the theory of *aslah* only to the moral and religious sphere. In the moral and religious field, God’s obligation to conduct what is best for humans is also a logical result of divine justice. God is responsible for providing a suitable and facilitating environment for humans to fulfill their responsibilities. In this regard, Qādi said: “We regard grace as obligatory upon God in supporting the responsible persons or removing their hindrance to choosing the right”. In the same place, he also said: “Grace means that which makes one choose the moral and avoid evil, or make one more inclined to choose the moral or abandon the evil” (Kadi Abdülcebbar 2013, vol. 2, p. 354). Elsewhere, Qādi referred to these divine supports as the physical and cognitive power and necessary tools that God has given to humans, removing the obstacles to finding the truth, giving health and sufficient time, instilling goodness in the mind of humans, sending a prophet to humans, and receiving rewards, praise, and punishment both in this world and in the next world as a result of their actions (Kadi Abdülcebbar 2017, p. 100).

According to Qādi, God does not act in a way that distort humans’ good behaviors. At this point, Qādi made the following analogy: “When a person invites someone to dinner sincerely, he/she should do things that will make it easier for him/her to accept the invitation rather than things that will cause him/her difficulties. God also similarly treats His servants” (Kadi Abdülcebbar 2017, p. 114). It also states in the Qur’an that it is easier

for people to comply with God's call for good: "Had it not been for God's grace and mercy, you would have followed Satan—except for a few" (4:83)<sup>10</sup>. For Mu'tazila, the only area where God can be accused is not related to His allowing evil but to His negligence to create the necessary environment and good cognitive and spiritual readiness not to commit any evil. It would be a moral weakness for God to withhold such graces from His servants. A just God is free from such weaknesses (Kadi Abdülcebbar 2017, p. 100).

To include the theory of *aslah*, which is valid only in the religious field, in my defense of structural free will, the morally obligatory *aslah* to God is the giving of suitable environments that will make humans more prone to goodness. In other words, with the theistic content of structural free will, human beings have been structurally manipulated for the better. God has structurally given the same blessings to every human being, and therefore, each person is inherently more motivated to perform good than to perform evil. Examples such as God's creating conscience in man and sending prophets to warn people can be understood in this context. The Prophet's calling people to the good without abolishing their freedom of choice is an example of manipulating this structural free will for the better. The person who chooses to perform evil has the opportunity to perform this act, and the fact that structural free will has been manipulated for the good does not eliminate this possibility.

## 6. Conclusions

In this study, I suggested a revision to Plantinga's free-will defense in order to meet Sterba's two significant criticisms on the problem of evil, the failure of the free will defense in justifying the amount and degree of evil in the world, and indefensibility of a morally good God allowing terrible evil to occur. In response to both criticisms, I proposed two modifications to Plantinga's free-will defense: understanding free will as structural free will, and complementing the structural free will with a specific moral theology. By understanding structural free will as the conditions in which human acts occur, I disassociated free will from any individual actions and its results. Structural free will refers to the possibility of all, either evil or good. Therefore, God cannot be held responsible for the moral consequences of any evil act of an individual who uses the freedom provided by this structure. By a specific moral theology, I proposed a moral defense of the structural free will that makes terrible evil possible as a human choice. Although human beings are independent in their acts in this world due to the structural character of free will, they will receive righteous rewards and punishments from God, due to their relationship with the just God. This justice of God does not interfere with structural free will, nor does it leave victims alone with their sufferings.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Against the logical argument of evil, Rowe develops an evidential objection. For him, although the existence of evil is not logically incompatible with the existence of God, it is still a rational basis for atheists' arguments. Rowe says: "... there are instances of intense suffering which an omnipotent, omniscient being could have prevented without thereby losing some greater good or permitted some evil equally bad or worse". (Rowe 1979, p. 338).

<sup>2</sup> Here, I am aware that Plantinga's free-will defense was not designed for the logical harmony of God's existence and the terrible evils Sterba mentions. In this study, however, I suggest that an answer to Sterba's critique can be integrated into Plantinga's free-will defense. I would like to thank the anonymous reviewer for drawing my attention to this point.

<sup>3</sup> For a useful introduction for Mu'tazila, see (Ormsby 1984, pp. 16–30).

<sup>4</sup> From now on, I call him as Qādi.

- <sup>5</sup> (Plantinga [1974] 2001, p. 29). Italics are in the original text.
- <sup>6</sup> Hume says here: “Is he willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then he is impotent. Is he able, but not willing? Then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing? Whence then is evil?” (Hume 1998, p. 63).
- <sup>7</sup> In this study, I am not advocating a deistic understanding of God when I argue that God does not interfere with free-will and that God is only in a structural relationship with the acts of human beings. In my understanding, God is structurally in contact with the world and human beings at all times. God is recreating this structural relationship moment by moment. So the God I’m trying to understand is still the God of the Abrahamic religions. I would like to thank the anonymous reviewer for drawing my attention to this point.
- <sup>8</sup> The translations used from the website (<https://quran.com/>) (accessed on 20 July 2022). Also see similar verses in the Quran for example; 18:29, 25:57, 39:15, 41:40, 73:19, 74:37, 76:29, 80:12, 81:28.
- <sup>9</sup> God’s justice can be understood in two ways. The first is that God gives a reward to the victims of free will He created. Second, it is human’s responsibility how to use free will, and therefore God rewards those who are aggrieved as a result of human action. Reward and punishment, which are God’s justice, are the result of free will, something God created. Let us imagine, human beings might not have used their free will for evil. In this case, God’s punishment ceases to be an inevitable result. So, punishment is only an option. As Keith Ward wisely points out that we can consistently think that God creates the possibilities of evils without wanting actual evils to happen. (Ward 2007, pp. 48–49; Søvik 2011, p. 43). I would like to thank the anonymous reviewer for drawing my attention to this point.
- <sup>10</sup> See also another examples in the Quran: 16:18, 28:73,30:23, 49:8, 3:152, 3:164.

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