

Imagination of Innocence: Ricœur and the Islamic Notion of Natural Disposition (*Fitra*)

Selami Varlik

Associate Professor of Philosophy, Istanbul 29 Mayıs University in Türkiye

Abstract

This article examines the ways in which the imagination of innocence in Ricœur resonates with the Islamic notion of *fitra*. Two major discrepancies are first identified: whereas Ricœur inherits a Christian vision of evil as an originary scandal, *fitra* designates the human being's natural disposition toward the good; and whereas Ricœurian fault resists any rational demonstration of God's existence, *fitra* – particularly in al-Māturīdī – grounds the human capacity to recognize God through reason. Yet a convergence emerges: for Ricœur, the Fall is only thinkable against the backdrop of a goodness and innocence that are more primordial and persist in superimposition. The aim here is not to establish a consensus between the two approaches, but to explore the possibility of a mutual decentering, articulated around a double logic of “in spite of”: imagining the good in spite of evil in Ricœur, and imagining the possibility of fault in spite of the primacy of the good in Islamic thought – in such a way that each intellectual tradition may revitalize its own categories through contact with the other.

Keywords: Ricœur, Imagination of Innocence, Evil, Islamic Theology, Natural Disposition (*fitra*), al-Māturīdī.

Résumé

Cet article examine la façon dont l'imagination de l'innocence chez Ricœur entre en résonance avec la notion islamique de *fitra*. Deux écarts majeurs sont d'abord relevés : là où Ricœur hérite d'une vision chrétienne du mal comme scandale originaire, la *fitra* désigne la disposition naturelle de l'humain au bien ; et là où la faute ricœurienne résiste à toute démonstration de Dieu, la *fitra* – notamment chez al-Māturīdī – fonde la capacité rationnelle à reconnaître Dieu. Pourtant, une convergence émerge : chez Ricœur la Chute n'est pensable qu'à partir d'une bonté et d'une innocence plus originaires, qui persistent en surimpression. L'enjeu ici n'est pas d'établir un consensus entre les deux approches, mais de penser la possibilité d'un décentrement mutuel articulé autour d'une double logique du *en dépit de* : imaginer le bien malgré le mal chez Ricœur, imaginer la faute malgré la primauté du bien dans la pensée islamique, de façon à ce que chaque tradition intellectuelle puisse revivifier ses propres catégories au contact de l'autre.

Mots-clés : Ricœur, imagination de l'innocence, mal, théologie islamique, disposition naturelle (*fitra*), al-Māturīdī.

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Selami Varlik

Associate Professor of Philosophy, Istanbul 29 Mayıs University in Türkiye

Introduction

Ricœur departs from the radical emphasis on finitude found in many phenomenological and existentialist thinkers, presenting instead the human being as defined by the tension between finitude and infinitude. Finitude is central in Ricœur's thought, as it shapes the human condition, grounds moral responsibility, and reveals the limits of knowledge and existence. Yet, *Fallible Man* establishes a tension with infinitude, creating a standard of truth achievable through reason and opening the way to spiritual joy or Intellectual Love, reminiscent of Descartes and Spinoza. Thus, human being is "no less destined to unlimited rationality, to totality, and beatitude than he is limited to a perspective, consigned to death, and riveted to desire."¹ This epistemological concern carries an ethical corollary: human disproportion prevents finitude from being seen as an original corruption. Existence is an opening toward the infinite, not closure in lack, allowing the imagination of innocence to hold that evil is secondary to the pursuit of good.

Yet, whether through Christ's suffering or the question of original sin, Ricœur was profoundly shaped, in addition to Kantian influences, by the Christian-Lutheran tradition, so that evil is always already there and possesses unfathomable depth. Even independently of Ricœur, the Christian kerygma – whether through more or less direct influence, or by way of opposition – has played an undeniable role in the development of phenomenology and hermeneutics. Yet the very notion of the Fall presupposes an original state from which it occurs. In this light, the persistence of—even imagined—innocence somewhat echoes the Quranic emphasis on human goodness: Every human being is born with a disposition toward doing good and an awareness of God's unity, which accompanies them throughout life, particularly since Adam himself was forgiven after his sin. A confrontation with Islam on this point may be fruitful, for by offering another narrative configuration of the foundational events, the Quran provides an opportunity to reconfigure some of the elements that have shaped Western memory.

Ricœur's engagement with Islam is ambivalent. On one hand, Islam has, according to him, never succeeded in combining conviction with critical reflection, unlike Western culture, which has been able to critically engage with all the traditions that have shaped it.² On the other hand, he acknowledges the significant contribution of Islamic thought to medieval Europe: "Westerners are not unaware that Muslim thought is in a way woven into their own Middle Ages: al-Kindī, al-

¹ Paul Ricœur, *Fallible Man*, trans. Charles A. Kelbley (New-York: Fordham University Press, 1986), 3.

² Paul Ricœur, "La crise de la conscience historique et l'Europe", in *Ética e o Futuro Da Democracia*, ed. João Lopes Alves (Lisboa: Edições Colibri/S.P.F., 1998), 30.

Fârâbî, Avicenna, Averroes, Ibn Khaldun belong to universal thought.”³ Ricœur remains convinced that a revitalized Islamic world would share a unique proximity with European civilization, rooted in a shared creative engagement. Religiously speaking, the relationship between Islam and Christianity involves both divergences, such as incarnation and crucifixion, and convergences, such as the unity of God and creation. It is at the intersection of these convergent and divergent lines that our study situates itself, comparing Ricœur’s imagination of innocence with the Islamic notion of *fitra*, usually translated as “natural disposition.”⁴ In line with Ricœur’s rejection of compromises and consensus, the aim is less to establish a conceptual proximity than to initiate a dual process of decentering. This will take place through a dynamic and complementary relationship between two paradigms: innocence despite evil in Ricœur, and fault despite good in Islamic thought.

First, I will show the profound divergence between the Islamic concept of *fitra* – an innate, optimistic disposition toward good and knowledge of God – and Ricœur’s Christian-influenced vision, where evil is always already there. While Islamic thought, notably through al-Mâturîdî, upholds a rational theology grounded in this original nature, Ricœur regards evil as an irrational scandal that precludes ontotheological certainty and requires the stripping away of absolute knowledge. However, in the second part, I will show that for Ricœur, goodness remains more original than evil and must be recovered through the imagination of innocence after the Fall. The very idea of the Fall presupposes an initial state of innocence whose loss it represents. In the third part, my goal is less to trace doctrinal convergence than to highlight that Islamic thought occupies a hybrid position between sameness and otherness, distinct both from the self and from the absolute Other. Imagined innocence thus becomes a tool of decentering, allowing both traditions to understand the other by discovering alterity at the heart of the self: goodness despite evil; evil despite goodness.

1. Natural Disposition *versus* the Scandal of Evil

1.1. Predisposition to the Good or Primacy of Evil

The Islamic conception of natural disposition (*fitra*) refers to the innate, original state in which every human being is created, oriented toward the recognition of God and the distinction of truth from falsehood. *Fitra* is, at best, more optimistic and, at worst, more neutral than the Christian perspective that – among other sources – underpins the Ricœurian vision of fault. The term evokes origin and creation, denoting the manner in which humans were fashioned by God.⁵ Humanity, by virtue of its creation, possesses an innate predisposition toward ethical goodness and recognition of the Divine. A celebrated hadith states: “Every newborn is born in a state of *fitra*. Then his parents make him a Jew, a Christian, or a Magian, just as an animal is born intact.”⁶ In his study on the subject, Yasien Mohamed identifies three approaches to *fitra*: the dualistic view, in which humans are equally inclined to good and evil; the neutral view, positing no particular inclination; and the

³ Paul Ricœur, “Introduction”, in *Les cultures et le temps. Études préparées pour l’Unesco* (Paris: Payot/Les Presses de l’Unesco, 1975), 30.

⁴ The proper transliteration is *fiṭra*, but I use *fitra* to facilitate the term’s appropriation.

⁵ Quran 30:30.

⁶ Muslim, *ṣaḥiḥ Muslim*, (Beirut: Dar Iḥya’ al-Kutub al-‘Arabiyah, 1955), Kitab al-Qadr, hadith 2658.

positive view, of an intrinsic predisposition toward the good – the dominant position in Islamic tradition.⁷ Sin brings concupiscence, evidenced by the sudden awareness of nakedness, and ends the primordial sojourn in Paradise, as Adam and Eve are commanded to descend to Earth.⁸ Yet Adam seeks forgiveness, and God accepts it.⁹ Humanity is prone to forget its origins and the Divine; prophets and revelations restore these primordial truths. Unlike the Christian figure of perpetual temptation, here the risk lies in forgetfulness, which is inherently less grave. Humans are inclined to evil insofar as they are tempted by the Devil, yet “it is not an imbalance that irremediably ruins human nature or renders man powerless to resist the Demon or perform good.”¹⁰

In an ethical sense, the primacy of *fitra* implies that every human being possesses an innate predisposition to discern and pursue the good. *Fitra* is frequently likened to the purity of a child. Moral goodness aligns with the human conscience, which experiences unease when committing evil. In a well-known hadith, the Prophet advised Wābiṣah ibn Maʿbad to consult his heart, noting that righteousness brings peace, while sin causes doubt and unrest.¹¹ Consequently, committing evil entails discomfort, as it constitutes an act of injustice against oneself.

This ethical dimension of natural disposition is particularly explicit in the thought of Abū Mansūr al-Māturīdī (d. 944). Al-Māturīdī, regarded as the founder of the school of theology known as Maturidism, developed a theological approach that granted an important role to reason in the understanding of faith while upholding the authority of revelation.¹² His case is of singular interest, as he was a founding figure of Sunni Islamic theology and, during the early centuries of Islam, authored a comprehensive commentary on the Quran. For al-Māturīdī, human nature is inclined toward the good, even if it may stray under external influences like Satan or the environment. Nevertheless, humans are endowed with reason and the capacity (*qudra*) to distinguish good from evil, remaining naturally predisposed to prefer the former.¹³ Individuals should act according to sound reason (*ʿaql salīm*), which reliably recognizes the good and the beautiful. Hence, humans whose *fitra* remains uncorrupted experience happiness and peace after virtuous deeds, but sorrow, guilt, and regret after base actions.

This Islamic emphasis on the good contrasts with the importance Paul Ricœur assigns to evil. For him, fault shadows finitude and is not confined to tragic philosophies; even rationalism is

⁷ Yasien Mohamed, “The Interpretations of *Fitrah*”, *Islamic Studies* 34, no. 2 (1995): 135. More generally, see also: Ramon Harvey, ‘Primordial Human Nature (*fiṭra*)’, *St Andrews Encyclopaedia of Theology*, edited by Brendan N. Wolfe et al (2024). <https://www.saet.ac.uk/Islam/PrimordialHumanNature> accessed April 29, 2026.

⁸ Quran 7:22.

⁹ Quran 20:122.

¹⁰ Georges C. Anawati, “La notion de ‘péché originel’ existe-t-elle dans l’Islam ?,” *Studia Islamica*, no. 31 (1970), 37.

¹¹ Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, hadith 6195.

¹² As with the term *fiṭra*, I use the simplified form “al-Māturīdī” in order to facilitate its use among scholars outside Islamic studies.

¹³ Abū Maṣṣūr al-Māturīdī, *Taʾwīlāt Al-Qurʾān*, ed. Bekir Topaloğlu (Istanbul: Ensar Neşriyat, 2005), 11:186. The two digits indicate volume and page.

traversed by a “ceaseless, stifled, yet ever-resurging interrogation” into its enigma.¹⁴ Whether in evil committed through original sin or endured in Christ’s sufferings, Christian consciousness remains more preoccupied with evil than its Islamic counterpart. Now, as Daniel Frey notes, this conception of fault is inherited from the Christian tradition.¹⁵ Yet, although deeply attentive to sin, Ricœur distances himself from original sin because it rationalizes fault into a pseudo-concept. He rejects this pseudo-knowledge, not sin as a symbol that provokes thought. Evil is a scandal, the point where philosophies fracture and resist rationalization. Sin is thus a disconcerting and scandalous experience, making it necessary to take a detour through myth and symbol to grasp its depth.

Drawing on the Christian vision of sin and Kant’s notion of radical evil, Ricœur writes “evil does not begin because it is always already there in some fashion; it is choice *and* heritage.”¹⁶ We enter a drama that has already begun, for evil, in a sense, precedes us. In acting, the self inscribes itself within a lineage of prior evil, embodied in human fallibility. Every individual encounters this pre-existing evil and perpetuates it; no one originates it absolutely.¹⁷ Ricœur links this always already there character of evil to original sin, whose power refers to the “most radical in the confession of sins, namely, the fact that evil precedes my awareness, that it cannot be analyzed into individual faults, that it is my pre-given impotence.”¹⁸ Distinguishing itself from the individual responsibility emphasized by the *fitra*, the paradox of the “bound will” (*serf-arbitre*) arises from this *always already there* evil: the individual is both the free author of their acts and the victim of prior captivity, since evil is lodged at the heart of the will. Ricœur adopts Luther’s oxymoron to describe a freedom confronted with the radically alienated human condition. Sin reveals a freedom already captive to itself. The bound will embodies human liberty’s internal contradiction: one is responsible insofar as one could have acted otherwise, yet experiences a prior captivity that impels toward evil. Freedom is real, yet always paradoxical, rendering evil irreducible to rationalization: “Man is not part free and part guilty; he is totally guilty, in the very heart of a total freedom as complete as the power to decide, to move, and to consent. (...) I *am* free *and* this freedom is unavailable.”¹⁹ As Saint Paul, quoted by Ricœur, writes: “The good that I would I do not, and the evil I would not I do.”²⁰

The transition from innocence to fault is not a pure, instantaneous act of will but part of a “duration of temptation” that dramatizes the Fall.²¹ This duration nuances the rupture between innocence and fault implied by passage. Sin is inscribed in an abrupt event – the act of eating the fruit in Genesis 3:6 embodies the Fall’s irrationality. Yet the passage is not entirely instantaneous,

¹⁴ Paul Ricœur, “Culpabilité tragique et culpabilité biblique,” *Revue d’histoire et de philosophie religieuses* 33, no. 4 (1953), 285.

¹⁵ Daniel Frey, *La religion dans la philosophie de Paul Ricœur* (Paris: Hermann, 2021), 105.

¹⁶ Paul Ricœur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, trans. Emerson Buchanan (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), 300.

¹⁷ Ricœur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 256.

¹⁸ Paul Ricœur, “The Hermeneutics of Symbols and Philosophical Reflection: I,” in *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics*, ed. Don Ihde, trans. Denis Savage (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1974), 306.

¹⁹ Paul Ricœur, *Freedom and Nature: The Voluntary and the Involuntary*, trans. Erazim V. Kohak (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1966), 26.

²⁰ Ricœur, *Freedom and Nature: The Voluntary and the Involuntary*, 21.

²¹ Ricœur, “Culpabilité tragique et culpabilité biblique,” 303.

occupying a lapse of time – the very duration of temptation. The biblical narrative transforms an instant of rupture into a complex story with temporal and psychological depth. Evil's origin disperses among characters: God who forbids, the serpent who seduces, the woman who yields, and the fruit that attracts. The dramatization of the Fall reshapes it into a drama of existence, where evil emerges not as an absurd leap, but through a seductive process embedded in human freedom. Moreover, the serpent as tempter is central to the proximity between sin and tragic fault. Human free will is no longer the sole cause of the Fall, confronted as it is by an alterity that accentuates human weakness, giving evil a tragic, almost inevitable, character. The serpent's origin remains enigmatic. The tragic dimension of its seduction lies in its mere presence: "the serpent is there; that is all."²² This quasi-exteriority makes possible the alibi of bad faith, fostering the sense of being deceived by an external force and thus echoing the tragic feeling of being a victim of destiny. Even if biblical fault differs from the more radical tragic guilt, Ricœur brings the notion of temptation closer to the Greek vision.

1.2. Theological Proofs or the Indemonstrable God

This primary ethical divergence between Ricœur and Islamic thought may be supplemented by a second, concerning the recognition of God's existence. The predisposition toward the good is inseparable from the predisposition to recognize the Divine through reason, so that one is "innately predisposed to know God and to do good."²³ In hermeneutic terms, there exists a pre-understanding of both the knowledge of the good and the recognition of divine unity (*tawhīd*). Commenting on Quran 7:157,²⁴ al-Māturīdī grounds a rational theology linking these ethical and theological axes. The good God commands through revelation corresponds to that which reason identifies as such.²⁵ By reason and intuition, humans can distinguish good from evil, truth from falsehood, and the beneficial from the harmful, for God has placed within the human constitution the faculty to know what is good and what is evil. Even before physical creation, the Primordial covenant (*al-mīthāq al-awwal*) was sealed between God and human beings, since the latter assembled all souls, asking "Am I not your Lord?" to which they replied, "Yes, we bear witness," thus entering a covenant in pre-eternity.²⁶

The link between *fitra* and the proof of God's existence is particularly evident in al-Māturīdī's work, discussed above in its ethical dimension.²⁷ In his exegesis, *Ta'wīlāt al-Qur'ān*, he presents *fitra* as a *disposition* (*isti'dād*) created by God for seeking and turning toward Him – less an innate knowledge than an original aptitude, or, to put it in Ricœurian terms, a capability. As fallibility in Ricœur represents the possibility of evil rather than its actuality, *fitra* denotes the possibility of divine knowledge rather than its realized state. Al-Māturīdī evokes the image of an

²² Ricœur, "Culpabilité tragique et culpabilité biblique," 305.

²³ Mohamed, "The Interpretations of *Fiṭrah*," 140.

²⁴ "Who commands them to do right and forbids them to do wrong, who makes good things lawful to them and bad things unlawful." The translation used is that of M.A.S. Abdel Haleem.

²⁵ al-Māturīdī, *Ta'wīlāt al-Qur'ān*, 6:81.

²⁶ Quran 7:172.

²⁷ Shaykh Abu Mansoor al-Māturīdī, *The Book of Monotheism. Kitaab At-Tawheed: God and the Universe. A Manual of Sunni Theology*, trans. Sulaiman Ahmed (London: Maturidi Publications, 2019), 30–33: "Proof that the Universe has a Creator."

infant instinctively predisposed to suckle.²⁸ He provides a threefold commentary on verse 30:30,²⁹ where the root *f-ṭ-r* appears twice: *fitrat Allāh* refers to the predisposition enabling recognition of God's existence and Oneness; *faṭarahum* denotes the very fact that humans were created according to this natural disposition; and finally, the verse affirms *fitrat*'s immutability, stating that there is no change in God's creation. Humans are thus born with *fitra* and retain it throughout life, despite deleterious influences.

Fitrat does not in itself guarantee recognition of God; it depends on the proper use of reason (*'aql*). In his commentary on Quran 6:79,³⁰ al-Māturīdī explains that the human constitution includes proofs of divine oneness (*waḥdāniyya*) and lordship (*rubūbiyya*), reflecting a rational nature capable of inference (*istidlāl*).³¹ It is through reasoning that Abraham concludes that the Creator God cannot perish, unlike the moon or the sun. By struggling against passions, humans can actualize this predisposition to recognize God rationally through observing the external world. Commenting on the verse, "Do the disbelievers not see how rain clouds are formed, how the heavens are lifted, how the mountains are raised high, how the earth is spread out?"³² al-Māturīdī emphasizes that reflection (*tafakkur*) enables the discernment of signs pointing to God's existence and oneness—the same term *āya* referring both to outward signs and to the verses of the Quran.³³ The Qur'ān presents the order and harmony of the world – the alternation of night and day, the sun, moon, stars, clouds, mountains, seas, and trees – as signs of God. Non-human beings are also created according to a *fitra* that inclines them toward perpetual worship of God through obedience to the inner law He has set. Al-Māturīdī distinguishes three forms of glorification: first, that of creation itself, as every being bears divine testimony within its *fitra*; second, that of knowledge, proper to humans who consciously recognize transcendence; and third, a constraining glorification in natural elements, which obey God even against their customary order, such as Moses' staff becoming a serpent.³⁴

Here again, the difference from Ricœur is profound. For him, the absurdity of evil, which belongs to the realm of the irrational, entails renouncing pretensions to absolute knowledge. The depth of evil also precludes the possibility of a rational theology capable of establishing God's existence through reason alone. Ricœur states: "We clearly reject the pretensions of an overly zealous apologetics which would pretend to derive God from nature or from subjectivity by a simple rational implication."³⁵ Accordingly, while he distances himself from Heidegger regarding the total rejection of the metaphysical tradition, he nonetheless opposes any onto-theological proof of God's existence. He rejects proofs of God, so as not to include God in our enterprise of

²⁸ al-Māturīdī, *Ta'wīlāt al-Qur'ān*, 11:186.

²⁹ "So [Prophet] as a man of pure faith, stand firm and true in your devotion to the religion. This is the natural disposition God instilled in mankind – there is no altering God's creation."

³⁰ "I have turned my face as a true believer towards Him who created the heavens and the earth."

³¹ al-Māturīdī, *Ta'wīlāt al-Qur'ān*, 6:144.

³² Quran 88:17-20.

³³ al-Māturīdī, *Ta'wīlāt al-Qur'ān*, 10:183-185.

³⁴ al-Māturīdī, *Ta'wīlāt al-Qur'ān*, 14:331-332.

³⁵ Ricœur, *Freedom and Nature: The Voluntary and the Involuntary*, 468.

intellectual domination.³⁶ "Listening to Christian preaching, for the philosopher, first means stripping oneself of all onto-theological knowledge," writes Ricœur, rejecting the idea of God as a concept guaranteeing the coherence of a rational system.³⁷

Certainty not only conflicts with the humility of the believer but also entails a form of arrogance. In a late text, "Whoever Loses Their Life for My Sake Will Find It," Ricœur explains that renouncing certainty about proofs of God aligns with the call to lose one's life for Christ. Of God, we can know only one thing: He reveals Himself in the crucified Jesus, through the symbol of the suffering servant and its incarnation in the contingent event of the cross. In modern societies without persecution, this invitation has two meanings. First, practical: renouncing worldly goods, as in the example of Francis of Assisi. For those who have not embraced a hermit life, the second, sapiential meaning applies: the *imitatio Christi*, participating in Christ's sufferings through a life of sacrifice and self-denial. Philosophically, imitating Christ entails relinquishing any claim to the certainty of absolute knowledge. Madness and kenosis interrupt any march toward triumph or glory. To take up one's cross is to accept the overturning of the guarantee of knowledge, living a "life placed under the sign of the suffering Christ."³⁸ Academically, the threat lies in excessive knowledge and the will to power it provokes, whether in secular learning or religious doctrine. Ricœur cites Eberhard Jüngel, for whom faith represents the reversal of guarantee. He invokes Anselm of Canterbury's maxim, *fides quaerens intellectum*: faith precedes human reason, which can only understand intellectually what has first been believed.

2. Innocence in Ricœur: Before and Beyond the Fall

2.1. Imagining Innocence Before the Fall

Evil presents an *always already there*, a primary scandal that cannot truly be tamed. Yet the very idea of the primacy of the Fall is ambivalent, for a fall presupposes an initial state from which it occurs and whose loss it represents. According to Ricœur, the idea of original sin is more complex than it appears: if sin exists, it is a deviation relative to an even more primordial state. More generally, every passion is a degeneration of an original goodness. Ricœur notes that we understand passions "in their essence only as a perversion of...."³⁹ In *Fallible Man*, he presents passion as a distortion (*Sucht*) of an original quest (*Suchen*). Greed presupposes a legitimate pursuit of possession, vanity a legitimate pursuit of recognition and value. Any understanding of evil presupposes an understanding of original goodness, for "However primordial badness may be, goodness is even more primordial."⁴⁰ The historicity of perversion always relies on the structural goodness of human striving. Ricœur thus argues that the scandal of evil cannot be grasped without

³⁶ Paul Ricœur, "Whoever Loses Their Life for My Sake Will Find It," in *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination*, ed. Mark I. Wallace, trans. Donald Pellauer (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 286.

³⁷ Paul Ricœur, "Entre philosophie et théologie II: nommer Dieu (1977)," in *Lectures 3. Aux frontières de la philosophie* (Paris: Seuil, 1994), 289.

³⁸ Ricœur, "Whoever Loses Their Life for My Sake Will Find It," 288.

³⁹ Ricœur, *Fallible Man*, 111–12.

⁴⁰ Ricœur, *Fallible Man*, 145.

the imagination of innocence, a central concept in his philosophical anthropology.⁴¹ It denotes the capacity of consciousness, through myth and poetry, to represent humanity's original goodness and integrity preceding the experience of fault. The term reflects the ambivalence of the primacy of the Fall, which is also secondary to the pre-fall state. The primacy of innocence can be apprehended only imaginatively, since it is represented retroactively. Ambiguity arises because, "we have access to the primordial only through what is fallen."⁴²

The imagination of innocence functions as a Husserlian imaginative variation, allowing the philosopher to suspend the "prestige of the fact" and approach the essence of humanity.⁴³ Original innocence can only be represented through such variation, which distances consciousness from the empirical world to focus on essence. Empirically, we encounter only deformed passions, but to judge them as evil, we must grasp their unfallen essence. The scandal of evil makes any direct description of innocence impossible. Consequently, imagination relies on myth and poetry to reconstruct primordial innocence retroactively – consciousness must pass through fiction to represent an origin that is never immediate.

While biblical sin resembles tragic fault in some respects, a fundamental difference remains: tragic fault, for Ricœur, conflates human existence with culpability, as "the hero falls into fault as he falls into existence."⁴⁴ Ricœur identifies two key distinctions between tragic and biblical fault. First, the discovery of holiness resolves the problem of a wicked god and separates divine from human culpability. Second – and more pertinent here – the connection between the myth of the Fall and the myth of creation breaks with the notion of inevitable fault. Biblical sin appears as a "primordial event occurring *within innocence*" and cannot be equated with finitude itself.⁴⁵ The myth of innocence is secondary to the creation narrative, which forms its backdrop. The Fall, occurring within creation, is distinct from it, for creation in itself is good. Thus, "sin is not being, nor a structure, nor an aspect of being; it occurs as an event within being and cannot be coordinated with the ontological structure of humanity."⁴⁶ Ricœur thereby draws a fundamental distinction between sinful being and created being. The concept of *imago Dei* perfectly captures the primacy and anteriority of innocence, which also signifies primordial goodness; for *imago Dei* is both our created being and our innocence. Consequently, regardless of the degree of evil, goodness remains more original.

This distinction between the precedence of creation and the posteriority of sin is complemented by the distinction between finitude and fault. Finitude belongs to the very structure of human existence as situated between the finite and the infinite; it is an ontological condition, not a moral deficiency. Fault, by contrast, is not structural but event-like: a rupture rather than a condition. Finitude makes fault possible but not necessary, and Ricœur seeks to preserve this non-

⁴¹ Daniel Frey distinguishes three modalities of this imagination: "*philosophical imagination* conceives the originary through the fallen; *mythico-poetic imagination* offers a figuration of both original innocence and recovered innocence; finally, *utopian imagination* calls for the courage of concrete action within the heart of history, and the theme of utopia is known to undergo significant developments thereafter." See Daniel Frey, *La religion dans la philosophie de Paul Ricœur*, 151–52.

⁴² Ricœur, *Fallible Man*, 76.

⁴³ Ricœur, *Fallible Man*, 112.

⁴⁴ Ricœur, "Culpabilité tragique et culpabilité biblique," 288.

⁴⁵ Ricœur, "Culpabilité tragique et culpabilité biblique," 299.

⁴⁶ Ricœur, "Culpabilité tragique et culpabilité biblique," 300.

necessity. The imagination of innocence thus allows one to conceive finitude without fault, avoiding any ontologization of evil and preserving genuine responsibility.

Ricœur argues that finitude is not the negation of a primary affirmation or infinitude. Here, innocence can only be imagined because the individual remains fallible, a fallibility marked by the disproportion between the finite and the infinite. In accordance with the complementarity between the ethical and theological dimensions, this disproportion between finitude and infinitude then opens the way to an argument in favor of divine existence, without amounting to a proof in the classical sense. The discourse on finitude is only possible through an openness to the infinite; indeed, finitude alone is impossible.⁴⁷ Barnabas Aspray views Ricœur's necessity of the infinite as an argument for God, though not a theological proof, noting that "this infinitude is only grasped apophatically, through a negation of finitude."⁴⁸ Indeed, in contrast to the vast majority of French philosophers of his time, Ricœur maintains that any understanding of human finitude is inextricably linked to the question of transcendence.

2.2. The Persistence of Goodness

The link between creation and innocence means that innocence is not merely chronologically prior but constitutes the very nature of the created being. To be created is to be originally good, and one cannot cease to be good without negating one's created being. The secondary nature of sin ensures it always remains posterior and cannot erase the enduring foundation of goodness intrinsic to humanity. In this way, Ricœur excludes any ontologization of evil: sin is neither substance, structure, nor a constitutive aspect of human being, but a contingent event occurring within existence. The "anteriority" of innocence belongs to a mythical time, signifying ontological depth rather than historical succession. Guilt, therefore, pertains to history and choice, while primordial goodness remains coextensive with created being. The Fall is situated within history as distinct from the constitution of the human being. Humanity is both created and fallen, carrying constitutive goodness while marked by historical distortion.

Innocence and fault are not successive historical stages – an age of gold followed by irreversible Fall – but coexisting dimensions of human existence. Ricœur speaks of a "superimposition" of the historical on the primordial, in which the inconceivable event of the passage from the original goodness of the created being to the acquired evil of historical man gains a synchronic dimension.⁴⁹ The myth of innocence primarily offers a symbolic figure of the primordial, which continues to be glimpsed even amid degradation, thereby revealing it.⁵⁰ Ricœur

⁴⁷ Ricœur, *Fallible Man*, 25. Ricœur even asserts a certain connection to Descartes: "Descartes was correct when he said that the idea of the infinite was wholly positive and identical to being plane et simpliciter, and that the finite was at fault with respect to being." Paul Ricœur, "Negativity and Primary Affirmation," in *History and Truth*, trans. Charles A. Kelbley (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1965), 315.

⁴⁸ Barnabas Aspray, *Ricœur at the Limits of Philosophy: God, Creation, and Evil* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 15.

⁴⁹ Paul Ricœur, *Réflexion faite: autobiographie intellectuelle* (Éd. Esprit, 1995), 32.

⁵⁰ This preservation of the goodness of creation recalls the distinction that Ricœur draws between creation as a temporal beginning – which is in fact surpassed – and creation as an ontological origin that endures and persists within what has been created. See Selami Varlik, *Appropriation of Islamic Philosophy: Creation in Ricœur and Avicenna* (London: Bloomsbury, 2026), 110–18: "Difference between Origin and Beginning."

here invokes Rousseau, who consistently defends both “man’s natural goodness *and* his historical and cultural perversity.”⁵¹ Through the idea of a naturally good being, Rousseau enables us to conceive of natural goodness both as our innocence and as our nature.

As Daniel Frey rightly notes, by superimposing primordial goodness and historical evil, Ricœur “breaks with the Augustinian and Lutheran theological tradition by conceiving innocence as enduring through and despite the Fall.”⁵² In this, he departs from Heidegger, who reduces evil to finitude, notably in §58 of *Being and Time*. By deriving guilty consciousness from the finite structure of existence, Heidegger presents *Dasein*, through anxiety, as authentically being-in-debt. Ricœur criticizes this, arguing that debt is ontologized too quickly, at the expense of the ethical dimension of indebtedness.⁵³ By embedding fault within existential analytics and the unified structure of care, Heidegger overlooks the irreducible specificity of the experience of fault. This is also why Ricœur defends “the possibility of abstracting the fault”.⁵⁴ In the same way, he opposes the primacy of joy with the primacy of anxiety.⁵⁵ Spiritual Joy and Beatitude – as Descartes, Malebranche, and Spinoza describe – represent the ultimate ontological affect.⁵⁶ The individual is defined by the “Yes” of joy within the sorrow of finitude. The foundation of this joy is Spinoza’s *conatus*, the effort and desire to persist in being. Proposition VI of Part III of the *Ethics* is crucial for Ricœur, expressing that each being strives to persevere in its existence.

It is worth noting that in Islamic thought as well, primordial innocence is not immediately accessible, for two reasons. First, both *fitra* and *mithāq* are conveyed through revealed, imaginative discourse that presents the origin retrospectively. The verse of the covenant itself unfolds narratively, recounting a dialogue between the souls and God in a kind of pre-eternity. Second, for al-Māturīdī, this episode is indeed real, but the verbal exchange should not be understood literally. The *mithāq* means that the human being was created with a disposition such that, if the event had taken place literally, he would have answered *balā* (“yes”) to the question “Am I not your Lord?”.

For al-Māturīdī, Quran 7:172 means that at every stage of becoming, the human being is made to recognize that existence is not governed by parents but by a single, omniscient Creator.⁵⁷ The verse is thus read in light of “How can you ignore God when you were lifeless and He gave you life?”,⁵⁸ so that creation itself constitutes the proof that grounds recognition of the Creator. He therefore rejects literalist readings and understands the primordial covenant as inscribed in creation itself. God has placed in human constitution signs of His unity, a view reinforced by the *ḥadīth* on the *fitra* and Quran 30:30, which links *fitra* to human creation. The divine-human dialogue

⁵¹ Ricœur, *Fallible Man*, 145.

⁵² Frey, *La religion dans la philosophie de Paul Ricœur*, 149.

⁵³ Paul Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, trans. Kathleen Blarney (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), 351.

⁵⁴ Ricœur, *Freedom and Nature: The Voluntary and the Involuntary*, 25.

⁵⁵ For the profound divergences between Quranic anthropology and the emphasis Heidegger places on the notions of care (*Sorge*) and anxiety (*Angst*), see Selami Varlık, ‘Heidegger ve İslam Düşüncesi: Kaygının Hristiyan Kökeni ve Tecrübe-Akıl Karşıtlığı’, *Temaşa Erciyes Üniversitesi Felsefe Bölümü Dergisi*, no. 21 (June 2024): 150–71.

⁵⁶ Ricœur, *Fallible Man*, 106.

⁵⁷ al-Māturīdī, *Ta’wīlāt al-Qur’ān*, 6:105.

⁵⁸ Quran 2:28.

should thus not be taken literally but as occurring in the “language of state” (*lisān al-ḥāl*).⁵⁹ For al-Māturīdī, all beings continually glorify God through their *fitra*, albeit in an inaudible mode.

3. Innocence of the Other within the Self

3.1. Imagining the Other, Reimagining the Self

Ricœur conceives imagination as a means of approaching another religion, even the most distant: while each begins from their own religious experience, one can proceed through imaginative variation, as when one changes perspective on an object. From within a religion, one can step outside it to understand others progressively, “step by step.”⁶⁰ Ricœur advocates applying the same “assumption in imagination and sympathy” to religions other than one’s own.⁶¹ However, the case of Islam is somewhat different. We saw that Islam cannot be placed in the same category as, for example, Chinese thought, which Ricœur presents as an “absolute *other*.”⁶² It does not belong to “cultures that have not encountered each other,”⁶³ as with the Far East. Nor can it be reduced to the mere figure of the same. Given an interplay of distance and proximity, it occupies a genuinely hybrid position of sameness–otherness, where engagement with the other fundamentally requires introspection into the complexity of the self.

Thanks to this hybrid status, the imagination of the other is never independent of the self, which already reflects aspects of the other. The imagination of innocence thus does not function as a simple shared notion aimed at consensus – which Ricœur refuses – but as a *dual despite*: imagining innocence *despite* evil on one side, and fault *despite* goodness on the other. The imagination of innocence establishes a dual link with Islamic thought. Formally, it prevents finitude from closing in on itself, precisely through its disproportion with infinitude. It creates a space in which the self is already in tension with infinity, which can also be that of the other. In other words, it prevents finitude from becoming self-sufficient or closed. Here, the openness is formal rather than content-based: what matters is not the notion or experience that defines the other, but the capacity to engage with them through the fissure of finitude that the imagination of innocence reveals. The tension between finite and infinite within the self makes possible a corresponding disproportion between the self’s finitude and the other’s finitude – or even infinitude. Secondly, on the substantive level, the imagination of innocence echoes Islamic innocence and so reveals both proximity and distance between the two traditions. It allows engagement with Islam not merely from the outside, as a radical other, but also from within. Accordingly, the imagination of the other is never independent of the imagination – or re-imagination – of the self, and the *step by step* movement toward the other is inseparable from the self’s internal complexity.

In a 1993 text on the “Phenomenology of religion,” Ricœur outlines a series of hermeneutic circles in Jewish and Christian faiths, addressing their borrowings from adjacent cultures. Islam shares with these traditions a common encounter with Greek thought, exemplified in Avicenna’s

⁵⁹ al-Māturīdī, *Ta’wīlāt al-Qur’ān*, 6:107.

⁶⁰ Ricœur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 20.

⁶¹ Paul Ricœur, “Phénoménologie de la religion (1993),” in *Lectures 3. Aux frontières de la philosophie* (Paris: Seuil, 1994), 267.

⁶² Paul Ricœur, *On Translation*, trans. Eileen Brennan (London: Routledge, 2006), 36.

⁶³ Ricœur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 22.

work.⁶⁴ Having shown that the Judeo-Christian tradition can expand step by step, Ricœur situates Islam within the initial circle through cultural and conceptual exchanges with Hellenism, granting it a status of semi-other. This proximity is not religious but pertains to the universality of the two traditions. The imagination of innocence allows this proximity – suggested by Ricœur himself – to be extended further.

He identifies three types of step by step relations: depth, lateral, and retroactive.⁶⁵ First, depth relations focus on the Greco-Judeo core, descending through its layered structure to uncover the sedimentation of Western collective memory. Ricœur thus observes, already in his work on the symbolism of evil, innocence, and fault, that Western memory includes initially unknown or unexplored layers. Second, lateral relations extend the inquiry to the networks in which sources are embedded, as Hebrew culture can only be understood in relation to the ancient Near East, which itself is only marginally part of our memory. Third, retroactive relations reshape past and present: cultural memory is continually renewed through rediscoveries, returns to sources, and reforms. Ricœur highlights restoring lost intermediaries, like the Dead Sea Scrolls, and adjusting distances between traditions, showing how neo-pasts allow new incorporations into cultural memory and self-understanding. So, the imagination of innocence as a common pattern involves not only openness to the external other but also a rediscovery of otherness sometimes hidden or forgotten within the self.⁶⁶

Moreover, because innocence within the self is itself an object of imagination, it already embodies an irreducible internal otherness. The capacity to imagine innocence in the other – here, Islam – is thus facilitated by the imagination of the self's own innocence, which is never immediate but mediated through mythic origin and the distance bridged by imaginative work. This internal distance mirrors that between the self and the other's innocence, so that imagining the other entails a re-imagination of the self, or a conception of the self as another. As Kearney puts it, "between the logos of the One and the antilogos of the Other, there is the *dialogos* of the self as another."⁶⁷ Any effort to render the foreign more familiar must also make the familiar more strange – what Ricœur, following Heidegger, calls "displacing ourselves within our own origins."⁶⁸ Only that, as we have seen, the other's emphasis on innocence is even stronger. What the self carries as innocence fissuring its finitude is encountered in the other in a more fully realized form, preventing the reduction of the other to a mere likeness and further calling forth the work of imagination.

The point is not at all to find common ground for agreement, especially since Ricœur provides, notably through the imagination, the tools to conceive of the irreducible alterity of the other. The question is rather to ask what the philosophical reasons are for the self to take an interest in the other-than-self. The path I follow here is to suggest that imagining the other is also a necessary way of reimagining the self by accentuating and developing its inner possibilities.

⁶⁴ Ricœur, "Phénoménologie de la religion (1993)", 270.

⁶⁵ Ricœur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 20.

⁶⁶ See Ernst Wolff, *Lire Ricœur depuis la périphérie* (Brussels: Editions de l'Université de Bruxelles, 2021), 168–72.

⁶⁷ Richard Kearney, "Vers une herméneutique diacritique du passage. En dialogue avec Jean Greisch," in *Le souci du passage. Mélanges offerts à Jean Greisch*, ed. Philippe Capelle-Dumont et al. (Paris: Les éditions du Cerf, 2004), 27.

⁶⁸ Paul Ricœur, "Civilisation universelle et cultures nationales," *Esprit* (1940-), no. 299 (10) (1961), 452.

3.2. Imagination of Fault and Mutual Decentering

For Ricœur, the self's decentering through encounter with the Other is not unilateral. Reciprocally, Islamic thought can itself be affected by engagement with the Ricœurian emphasis on evil. Not only does Islamic innocence resonate within Ricœurian thought, but conversely, Islamic thought maintains a dynamic tension with the figure of evil. Thus, Islam's emphasis on goodness can be decentered by Ricœur's insistence on evil while preserving its secondary status. Moreover, the Quran repeatedly underscores how the natural disposition to reason and believe is constantly in tension with the risk of disobedience.

Indeed, in Islam one does not find a conception of evil as a deep inner corruption in which the will is distorted at its root and guilt becomes central. However, although the soul is not understood as inherently corrupted, the various Islamic schools have nevertheless extensively debated the possibility of evil's existence. The Mu'tazilites argued that God is absolutely just and cannot create evil, which therefore arises solely from human free will. For the Maturidites – and, in a similar way, the Ash'arites – God creates all acts, yet the human being remains responsible through “acquisition” (*kasb*) and the capacity to act. Evil is thus integrated into a broader divine wisdom (*ḥikma*) without being arbitrary, even though God is not bound by the demands of reason as He is in Mu'tazilite thought.⁶⁹

Human being is created according to the *fitra* but is also prone to inconstancy and impatience.⁷⁰ He is not inherently sinful, yet he tends to forget, in line with the very etymology of *insān*, human.⁷¹ The Quran repeatedly emphasizes human weakness and the tendency to “take one's own desire for God.”⁷² Verse 30:30 is particularly revealing: it ends with “though most people do not realize it,” highlighting that the *fitra* is universal yet largely unrecognized. The verse begins with an imperative, urging remembrance of what is easily forgotten.

Verses 95:4-6 are particularly striking for the tension they establish regarding human ethical nature: “We create man in the finest state (*aḥsani taqwīm*), then reduce him to the lowest of the low (*asfali sāfilīn*), except those who believe and do good deeds.” The passage is marked by two reversals. First, humans are created in the most perfect form – often interpreted as the *fitra* – but the same humans are subsequently reduced to the lowest state, which carries an almost primordial character, being established by God Himself. The verb *radadnāhu*, from the root *r.d.d*, can mean “to return” to a previous state; but it can also imply a reversion to an inferior or opposite condition. Second, those who believe and perform good deeds are exempt from this duality of human nature. Thus, goodness ultimately prevails, yet the central verse underscores human susceptibility to evil. As we saw with al-Mâtūrîdî, the *fitra* is a disposition toward faith and goodness, not their automatic realization, and thus allows for the possibility of disbelief. Its fulfillment requires proper use of reason. Al-Mâtūrîdî's commentary on this Quranic passage is illuminating: the tension between *aḥsani taqwīm* and *asfali sāfilīn* stems from human freedom, which can act in accordance with or against its nature by yielding to passion. Al-Mâtūrîdî interprets the first expression as a

⁶⁹ Shia Islam represents an interesting exception, as evil is understood in a dramatic sense through the lens of the Karbalā' tragedy. Historical evil finds its answer in the awaited return of the Occult Imam, whose coming will restore universal justice.

⁷⁰ Quran 70:19-21.

⁷¹ Quran 4:28.

⁷² Quran 25:43.

reference to human intellectual, volitional, and moral capacities. Human excellence lies in the dual capacity to reason and to will; reason can discern God's signs, yet the will remains free and may reject them.⁷³

In creation, humans occupy an intermediate status. On one hand, they possess a physical nature marked by finitude and fragility: they change, grow weak, and cannot always correct their flaws, linking them to other creatures. On the other hand, they have innate faculties – reason, will, and moral conscience – that distinguish them and make them capable of both the best and the worst. Thus, an individual can move from *aḥsani taqwīm* to *asfali sāfilīn*. Al-Mâtūrîdî reads this expression in an intellectual and ethical sense: just as the highest form reflects the proper use of reason and will, the lowest reflects their misuse.

The possibility of evil arises from the distinction in humans between *fitra* and *ṭab'*, i.e. human nature.⁷⁴ The *ṭab'* inclines humans toward excess and fleeting pleasures, so that natural impulses may diverge from the ethical and theological conclusions of reason.⁷⁵ Humans possess this nature to meet earthly needs, ensure offspring, maintain bodily vitality, and complete their lifespan; pleasure and enjoyment are necessary to a certain balance. Al-Mâtūrîdî explains negative human tendencies mentioned in the Quran – such as greed and impatience – as rooted in this nature, which can lead to forgetfulness (*ghafla*) of the primordial covenant and to sin. Humans may succumb to attachment, laziness, selfishness, love of power, or ingratitude, seeking limitless satisfaction that only Paradise can provide. Yet through reason, education, patience, and ascetic practice, they can resist these inclinations. So, human conflict lies between reason and nature. Yet this very freedom makes humans superior to angels, as they can choose faith and goodness despite the pull of evil; moral merit requires that good not be automatic but freely chosen. In his commentary on 30:30, al-Mâtūrîdî emphasizes that humans would naturally act according to *fitra* if left solely to their reason, unimpeded by the demands of their passionate nature.⁷⁶ Yet they are constantly subject to psychological and environmental influences and may yield to their desires. Choosing good is then never automatic; it requires continuous effort.

Thus, while Ricœur emphasizes evil first, tempered by the imagination of innocence, al-Mâtūrîdî prioritizes the good but do not ignore the real possibility of evil. Though less central and largely conceived as the absence of good, this danger could be framed as an “imagination of fault,” analogous to Ricœur's imagination of innocence. Avicenna's poetic narrative *Ḥayy Ibn Yaqzan* exemplifies this imaginative engagement: it depicts the soul's ceaseless struggle to attain absolute truth against the ever-present threat of evil. Like Ricœur's parables, which disorient the soul through narrative identification, Avicenna's story imitates action, so that the reader identifies with the rational effort combating evil. Imagination is internally tensioned, capable of both guiding

⁷³ See Fatma Aygün, “Mâtūrîdî'nin Ahsen-i Takvīm ve Esfel-i Sâfilīn Yorumu: Tîn Sûresi'nin Te'vîli Bağlamında İnsan Anlayışı,” *Diyanet İlmi Dergi* 56 (2020): 807–40.

⁷⁴ al-Mâtūrîdî, *Ta'wîlāt al-Qur'ān*, 2:9.

⁷⁵ See Osman Nuri Demir, “İmam Mâtūrîdî'de Akıl, İnsanî Doğâ (*Tab'*) ve Fıtrat,” *Diyanet İlmi Dergi* 56 (2020): 181–193.

⁷⁶ al-Mâtūrîdî, *Ta'wîlāt al-Qur'ān*, 11:185–187.

and misleading, and its depiction itself is imaginative. In this way, imagination cultivates the laborious ethical effort intrinsic to the act of thinking, both against and with its own influence.⁷⁷

Thus, even if Ricœur's emphasis on evil does not lie at the core of Quranic anthropology, it may still offer insight for Islamic thought, which sometimes risks overemphasizing the primacy of good, emphasizing what ought to be rather than what actually is. Ricœur advocates a "reasonable disagreement" between Europe and Muslims, avoiding consensus: "to accept that they tell history in their own words as we tell our history in our own words, and that these histories compete against each other in a kind of competition of discourse, what Karl Jaspers called a loving conflict."⁷⁸ This opens the possibility of mutual decentering along a Ricœurian *in spite of*: on one side, imagining the good *in spite of* the seeming dominance of evil; on the other, imagining the reality of evil *in spite of* the primacy of good.

This produces neither an equivalence between two conceptions of good or innocence, nor a strict opposition between good and evil, but rather a productive tension between two ways of calibrating the relation between good and evil. Each emphasis on good or evil can serve to nuance, decenter, and rebalance the corresponding emphasis in the other tradition. This yields different ways of orienting the "judgment of importance" in Ricœurian textual hermeneutics, where a shift in scale can make one element suddenly appear larger while another simultaneously seems smaller.⁷⁹ It is precisely a matter of *perspective* – as we find in *Fallible Man*: even when dominant in one tradition, it remains aware of the possibility of another perspective, grounded in the potentiality of the infinite Word. Except that this other perspective is not only the one dominant in the other tradition; it is also the perspective that, even subtly, resides at the very heart of the self.

4. Conclusion

On the one hand, Ricœurian thought already contains an *imagination of innocence*, even if it is dominated by an always already present evil. The opening toward Islamic thought is all the more possible insofar as innocence is already imagined within the self. The distancing of original goodness thus becomes an asset for rapprochement with Islamic thought. On the other hand, Islamic thought – particularly in al-Mâturîdî – is internally worked by an *imagination of fault*, despite the importance of the notion of *fitra*. Although the anthropology of the good remains predominant, the Quran is traversed by an internal tension between the primacy of *fitra* and the imminent possibility of fault, since human nature also inclines one to follow one's passions.

What emerges here – is not a conceptual proximity between two traditions centered on innocence or fault – as such common denominators tend to erase dissimilarities, and Ricœur rightly distrusts such compromises. Rather, what we find is the possibility of a complementarity between two figures of the "in spite of" (*en dépit de*): in one case, the good must always be imagined in spite

⁷⁷ See Selami Varlik, "Imagination et éthique de l'intellection : une lecture ricœurienne d'un récit d'Avicenne," *Etudes Phénoménologiques – Phenomenological Studies* 10 (2026), 81–109.

⁷⁸ Paul Ricœur, "Imagination, Testimony and Trust: A Dialogue with Paul Ricœur," in *Questioning Ethics: Contemporary Debates in Philosophy*, ed. Richard Kearney and Marc Dooley (London-New York: Routledge, 1999), 12.

⁷⁹ Paul Ricœur, *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics, II*, trans. Kathleen Blarney and John B. Thompson (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1991), 158.

of evil; in the other, the possibility of evil must always be imagined in spite of the good.⁸⁰ These two instances of *in spite of* do not operate on the same level; however, this interplay demonstrates, at the very least, that the encounter with the other is not merely a possibility; it remains a necessity, for it actualises certain perspectives of the self that had remained in the shadows – much as in the hermeneutics of the text, where a judgment of importance highlights notions that seemed secondary but suddenly revive the whole by reconfiguring the general configuration.

Consequently, I find it sometimes difficult to speak of “intercultural philosophy” with regard to certain notions in Islamic thought, as if the term might exaggerate the idea of a gap between the two traditions, even when intended to bridge it. The question of innocence has, I hope, shown that the attention given to Islamic thought here is motivated less by any ethical concern to engage with the other than by the internal complexity of Ricœurian philosophy itself, aimed at developing and re-problematizing a notion he is already exploring.

These reflections echo the continental contrast between two models of the relation between finitude and infinitude: Ricœur’s moderate view, in which the infinite conditions finite knowledge, and Falque’s radical view, in which it threatens the finite. Like Ricœur, Falque refuses to reduce finitude to sin, linking it instead to the mortality of the created. However, Falque insists that finitude is an absolute, positive horizon—not a deficiency or fall from a purer state. Finitude is “a horizon initially set as insurmountable” rather than a secondary state awaiting restoration.⁸¹ He even cites Ricœur’s critique of “the speculations on the supernatural perfection of Adam” to underscore this raw, original meaning.⁸² Yet, they diverge fundamentally: Ricœur’s subsequent imagination of innocence maintains a space for the infinite, even if this infinite is not strictly theistic.

Islamic thought radicalizes this awareness of the infinite by grounding it in rational certainty. With the *fitra*, to recognize God as infinite is not to possess the infinite, but to acknowledge one’s non-infinitude. In the Primordial covenant, which takes place precisely with the name *rabb* rather than *Allah*, the acceptance of the Lord (*rabb*) establishes a relational bond that defines the individual as a servant (*‘abd*) capable of distancing themselves from their passions. For Ricœur, the refusal of demonstrative certainty about God aligns with the call to “lose one’s life” for Christ, where *imitatio Christi* entails renouncing absolute knowledge in favor of a God addressed in prayer. Yet the God grasped through the remembrance of the Covenant is not an abstraction but a Lord. Al-Mâturîdî similarly stresses both divine unity and lordship (*rubûbiyya*), as the Quran repeatedly names God the “Lord of the worlds,” to whom all praise is due.⁸³ This lordship defines an asymmetrical relation of worship (*‘ibāda*), in which the believer recognizes their own weakness. Thus, certainty of the infinite is simultaneously certainty of one’s limits.⁸⁴

⁸⁰ Especially as the experience of evil remains more significant in Sufi literature, while maintaining the theological divergences observed between the two religions.

⁸¹ Emmanuel Falque, *Parcours d’embûches. “S’expliquer.” Disputations: Objections et Réponses* (Paris: Ecole franciscaine de Paris, Editions franciscaines, 2016), 86.

⁸² Ricœur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 233. See Emmanuel Falque, *The Guide to Gethsemane: Anxiety, Suffering, Death*, trans. George Hughes (New York: Fordham University Press, 2018), 13.

⁸³ Quran 45:36.

⁸⁴ See Selami Varlik, “Causality and Calculative Thinking: An Avicennian Response to Heidegger,” *Nazariyat. Journal for the History of Islamic Philosophy and Sciences*, 2024, 1–35.

The aim here is not to rehabilitate the idea of a proof of God's existence, but to show that – on an ethical or theological level – Quranic anthropology is not entirely foreign to debates on different models of finitude that run through continental philosophy itself. The status of sameness-and-otherness in Islamic thought can thus allow it to participate in the very development of contemporary philosophy, precisely because it offers a different emplotment of the characters and narratives that have shaped Western memory. As we know, Ricœur places great emphasis on the ethical and heuristic significance of the capacity to recount the same events differently.

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