

THE PROBLEM OF EVIL IN IGBO-AFRICAN PHILOSOPHIC THOUGHT AN EPISTEMIC APPROACH

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Abstract

A brief overview of the historical development of philosophy demonstrates that throughout different time periods, ranging from Ancient to Medieval, Modern, and contemporary eras, the concept of evil has consistently intrigued individuals from various social backgrounds. These inquiries revolve around understanding the origins, causes, purposes, and other aspects related to evil. While this has been the case, the focus of this paper is specifically on how evil is perceived by the average African. Recognizing that the culture of a society profoundly influences the world-view of its members, this paper examines the problem of evil from an Igbo/African perspective. The Igbo people, an ethnic group in Africa, are known for attributing the fundamental sources of their philosophical and social issues to religious contexts. Therefore, in order to objectively analyse the problem of evil within Igbo philosophy, it is necessary to consider its religious dimensions. This paper argues that the Igbo, similar to other African ethnic groups, acknowledge the existence of evil as a societal problem. However, unlike some other groups, the Igbo do not attribute the source of evil to God (Chi-Ukwu), but rather view it as a result of human actions within society or as a punishment from the gods for human disobedience.

Keywords: Problem of evil, Igbo-African, philosophic, thought, survey.

Introduction

In life, we have come across certain predicaments and bad situations that we cannot give clear explanations to. Life itself presented to us in one form or the other some kinds of challenges that we term evil whenever we face them. Hence, many experiences which we have encountered right from childhood had been a case of distinction between what is good and what is evil in one way or the other. To some, these experiences are pleasant while some will wish never to pass through such ugly and unpleasant ordeals again. The concept of evil is a complex matter that cannot be fully grasped or completely understood. It is a question that can only offer us a partial glimpse of truth, rather than a definitive and absolute comprehension. One important aspect to consider is that evil is relative to good. Therefore, when contemplating virtue, we inherently acknowledge the existence of its opposite, vice. These two concepts are intertwined and interconnected. Consequently, just as goodness flourishes within the framework of culture, so does evil.¹ What is particularly intriguing is that the Igbo people perceive the world through complementary dualities.

This perspective is evident in their understanding of society, which is composed of various pairs such as oha na eze (people and king) and nwoke na nwanyi (man and woman).²

From ages past, questions of an all-good and all-powerful God, existing *pari passu* with evil, burdened sages and scholars who we might as well consider as philosophers. In Western philosophy for instance this burden was visible on the 4th century BC philosopher Epicurus, the founder of Epicureanism. While addressing this problem, Hume (1947) puts the following words into the mouth of Philo concerning Epicurus thus, “Epicurus’ old questions are yet unanswered. Can God prevent evil if He is willing but not able? In that case, He would be impotent. If He is able but not willing, then He would be malevolent. But if He is both able and willing, where does evil come from?”³ These questions troubled medieval scholars like St. Augustine. In his *Confessions*, Augustine pondered the existence of evil and its origins, asking whether it has any substance or if it simply doesn't exist at all.⁴ Despite his inner turmoil and silent cries for answers, Augustine believed that God listened to him, even though he was unaware of it.⁵ St. Thomas Aquinas, influenced by Augustine's thinking, expressed the problem in a similar manner, questioning whether God, as a wise and caring provider, can eliminate the existence of evil. The presence of many evils suggests either that God is not omnipotent and cannot prevent them or that He does not care for everything.⁶

To achieve this goal, the issue of evil encompasses not just the question of whether God is truly all-good, but also raises doubts about divine omnipotence. It may even involve questioning the existence of God altogether. According to the Igbo, if God possessed unlimited power, goodness, and beings were inherently good due to their participation in divine goodness, then God would desire to eliminate all evil and have the ability to do so. The primary objective of this paper is to provide a clear and comprehensive explanation of the Igbo/African concept of evil. In doing so, we will delve into understanding the Igbo/African world-view while considering the problem of evil. Furthermore, we will attempt to explore the causes of evil and examine how it can be reconciled with God's omnipotence and role as the ultimate cause.

The Notion of Evil in Igbo/African World-view: An Overview

When mentions or references are made with respect to African world-view, it is assumed as a form of indulgence into a certain level of generalization. Africa as a continent is a territory that has vast geography and enriched culture with varieties and diversities. Onwuatiegwu attesting to this view writes that "... journeying across the African continent with clear observations of its diverse cultures and heritages, it is possible to identify distinct and diversified conceptions of realities and ideologies."⁷ However, " In describing, analysing or examining African thought in line with world views and main characteristics, the concepts of religion, moral, etc. are some of the examples that are common to the African world views as they are somewhat predominant in most traditional African settings."⁸ This is a credence to the reason why this paper adopts an Igbo/African perspective towards the problem of evil as an understanding of it would be admissible across the continent.

Moving forward, the totality of a people's view or belief about reality cuts across the nexus of their thought pattern, belief system and consequently, their attitude to life. This is cognitively referred to as world-view. Obviously, it is certain that people are always identified by their way of life referred to as culture. In the same vein, their thought or belief systems are also put into considerations whenever such people come to play. These thought or belief systems that a particular group or tribe is identified with is said to be their world-view.⁹ This survey affirms Okolo's viewpoint that African Philosophy possesses a distinctiveness and uniqueness derived from its subject matter, which encompasses the entire African experience across time (past, present, and future).¹⁰ Similarly, Abigidi suggests that African Philosophy could adopt a method of addressing its most urgent religious, social, and political issues by initially establishing metaphysical principles. This approach is evident as metaphysics encompasses a comprehensive field of study that explores various aspects, including the essence of existence itself, encompassing the universe's constituent elements such as God, deities, heaven, human communities, and inanimate objects.¹¹

Additionally, the Igbo people perceive their universe as consisting of two realms: the physical realm and the spiritual realm. The actions of spiritual beings and forces often directly impact the lives of humans in the human world. In this worldview, the Supreme Being is believed to reside in the sky, and major deities such as Lightning, Thunder, Sun, and Moon are in close proximity to Him. However, there is no

indication to suggest that the ancestors who reside in the ancestral world are inferior. A significant aspect of the Igbo perspective on reality is the acknowledgement of the elevated status and power of supernatural entities and immaterial beings over humans and the material world. Nonetheless, the world of humans holds a central position in the traditional cosmic structure of the Igbo. This is because, although human life is bestowed by God, it is considered the greatest good that can be nurtured. Consequently, the Igbo traditional understanding of the world is highly centered on humanity. Considering all these factors, the question arises: How does an Igbo individual comprehend and make sense of instances of evil and other related phenomena?

Good and evil are abstract concepts that are widely recognized in various philosophical perspectives. When considering the well-being of society, actions or things that benefit humanity as a whole are regarded as good, while those that harm humanity are seen as evil. In Igbo cosmological thinking, the metaphysical problem of evil has been a longstanding issue in Western philosophy. The Igbos have made efforts to explore the concept of evil from three overarching perspectives.

Cosmological Optimistic View:

In this perspective, Chukwu-Okike (the Creator) is inherently good in Himself, and His creations are also inherently good. Therefore, evil is external to Him, meaning that it is the result of moral wrongdoing committed by humans. Edeh supports this belief, stating that there is a belief in a created universe controlled by the creator, Chukwu-Okike, with humans occupying a central role. Humans possess freedom and responsibility within this creation. There is also a belief in the interconnectedness of all beings and the original harmony and order of the cosmos, which unfortunately gets disrupted by human actions (as depicted in the biblical story of the woman causing confusion).¹² From this perspective, evil is a consequence of human nature, as humans are at the center of God's creation. Therefore, humans are accountable for all the evil that occurs in the world due to their actions and way of being in the Igbo worldview. This viewpoint supports the African notion that God cannot be directly responsible for evil in the world. While humans are responsible for evil in the world, God indirectly allows it to happen, not as evil itself, but in the sense that evil arises when humans

exercise their capacity for good. However, there is an argument that this perspective absolves God of guilt, while emphasizing His assumed goodness and remaining silent about His supposed powers, which He could have used to prevent evil if He truly desired to.

Personal Chi and Destiny View:

In this perspective, evil is not directly associated with individuals, but with the personal god assigned to each person. The belief here is that a supreme being grants an individual a personal god (known as Chi), which determines their fortune, both good and bad, including poverty and sickness. Every positive and negative aspect of life is attributed to this personal god, which is also blamed for the individual's mistakes. Certain Igbo proverbs support this notion, such as "Ebe onye dalu ka Chi ya kwatulu ya," meaning "where a person falls, there his personal god pushed him down." According to traditional Igbo beliefs, God does not commit evil against His creation. They also believe that any misfortune or harm suffered by individuals is interpreted as punishment for their own or their parents' past misconduct. This belief stems from the understanding that human actions have consequences, not only in the present life but also in future generations. Importantly, this perspective acknowledges the existence of evil in the world without undermining the goodness and omnipotence of the Divine.¹³

The Centre Course View:

In this perspective, the existence of evil in the world is attributed to a combination of personal gods, human destiny, and various known and unknown spirits, including mischievous ones. Those who support this viewpoint believe that evil is dependent on the actions of humans and spirits, absolving God of any involvement or blame in the problem of evil. Edeh, expressing this view, states that God cannot be the immediate cause of evil, and instead, humans and spirits should be held responsible.¹⁴ Okon adds that the apparent evil and imperfections in the world are not inherent but rather the result of disruptions to the perfect cosmic order caused by human actions and the actions of spirits.¹⁵ However, God is still regarded as the Supreme Good, all-powerful, and the ultimate cause of all things that are inherently good. This perspective maintains that even if God is seen as the remote cause of evil in the sense that He created the proximate causes of evil, it should not be understood as God causing evil

itself. Rather, it suggests that because of the good He created, evil becomes an inevitable part of it.

Conclusion

This paper explores various perspectives on the concept of evil within the Igbo/African world-view and aligns with the prevailing beliefs of the majority of Africans. It emphasizes that evil is an inevitable presence in the world due to human actions and asserts that it is unrelated to God, neither challenging the existence of God nor the omnipotence attributed to God in Igbo culture and world-view. While the existence of evil is a significant aspect in debates about God's existence in Western traditions, it holds less prominence in discussions within the Igbo/African context. For Africans, the existence of God is not a subject of debate but a fundamental truth. The only contentious aspect revolves around explaining how God's involvement or lack thereof in the existence of evil can be reconciled without contradictions.

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