

Rethinking the Problem of Evil in Contemporary African Philosophy of Religion

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Abstract

African philosophers of religion have, recently, been preoccupied with the question of evil in a world created by a supernatural being who, apparently, could have eliminated evil or, at least, reduced it to the barest minimum, but did not do so. The question is: why did God allow evil in the world? Is he not omnipotent, omniscient and omnibenevolent? Responding, two African schools of thought have woken to the challenge posed about God's omnipotence, omniscience and omnibenevolence consequent upon the reality of evil. The first, theistic, claims that God is perfect; and, is not the cause of evil; while the second, limited-God school, asserts that evil exists necessarily, therefore, cannot be eliminated by God, who is limited in power, knowledge and goodness. Employing the critical-analytical methodology of research, this article subjects the conflicting views to critical evaluation with intent of identifying their strengths and weaknesses. The article discovers that the theistic school fails to reconcile the idea of a perfect God with the reality of evil in the world, while the limited-God school risks conceiving a God so diminished that he could be stripped of divinity with a concomitance he may no longer constitute a proper object of worship.

Keywords: God, evil, omnipotence, omniscience, omnibenevolence, African philosophy of religion

Introduction

African philosophy is a rational inquiry into the nature of man and the universe from the vantage of African worldview and experience.¹ One field of this philosophical tradition that has experienced vibrancy in recent times is African philosophy of

¹, Lucius T. Outlaw Jr. and Chike Jeffers, "Africana Philosophy," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2022 Edition), eds. Edward N. Zalta & Uri Nodelman, <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2022/entries/africana/>>

religion. The dominant issue, currently, in this field is the question of evil in a world believed to have been created by a God with omni-properties; namely, omnipotence, omniscience and omnibenevolence. The puzzle is: why does a God with these omni-properties, a supposedly perfect God, allow the presence of evil in the world created by him? The problem is: If God is perfect: he can do everything logically possible, knows everything and is all-loving, is it not contradictory that evil exist in the world that he created? By 'evil,' here, we mean the reality of harm and suffering which sentient beings – i.e., humans and animals – endure when they are alive. Understandably, evil can be moral, whereby harm and suffering are caused by the abuse of human free will; for example, premeditated murder. Or, it can be natural, whereby harm and suffering are caused by the way the physical world is structured and works; for example, the devastating impact of flooding.²

Within this field of African philosophy of religion, two provisional schools of thought have emerged based on their explanations for the reality of evil in the world. The first, a theistic school of thought, argues that God is not the cause of evil in the world. The notable scholars who hold this view include: Kwame Gyekye, Ebunoluwa Oduwole and Francis O. C. Njoku.³ Njoku, in fact, argues that our limited human reason cannot fathom why God allows evil to exist.⁴ On the other hand, proponents of limited-God such as Kwasi Wiredu, Ademola K. Fayemi, Joyline Gwara and L. Uchenna Ogonnaya, Jonathan O. Chimakonam and Amara

2. See: Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.1977); Richard Swinburne, *Providence and the Problem of Evil* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998); and Marilyn Adams, *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999).

3. See: Kwame Gyekye, *An essay on African Philosophical Thought: The Akan Conceptual Scheme*. Rev. ed. (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1995); Ebunoluwa O. Oduwole, *The Dialectics of Ire (goodness) and Ibi (evilness): An African Understanding of the Philosophical Problem of Evil*. *Philosophia: International Journal of Philosophy* 36, no.1 (2007); and Francis O.C. Njoku, *Essays on African Philosophy, Thought, and Theology* (Owerri: Claretian Institute of Philosophy, 2002).

4. Njoku, *Essays on African Philosophy, Thought, and Theology*.

E. Chimakonam and Ada Agada⁵ counter-argue that the problem of evil in the world cannot be suitably explained on the basis of a perfect God; rather, it can best be resolved by positing the idea of a limited God.

This article examines the theistic perfect-God stance to determine its success in reconciling the idea of God's perfection with the reality of evil and probes the limited-God orientation to determine the extent to which the notion of divine limitation diminishes the idea of God as an object of worship. It adopts the critical-analytical methodology of philosophical argumentation to interrogate the claims of the two schools of thought and evaluates their strengths and weaknesses. The article focuses narrowly on African philosophy of religion. For this reason, it does not discuss the works of widely read religious studies scholars like E. Bolaji Idowu, John S. Mbiti and Emefie Ikenga-Metuh.

The Problem of Evil in Western Philosophy: A Nutshell

The logical and evidential problem of evil has occupied the attention of philosophers for centuries. The ancient Greek philosopher Epicurus is believed to have aptly posed the problem of God's omnipotence and the reality of evil when he wondered whether the omnipotent and omniscient God is able but unwilling to eliminate evil or whether evil exists because God is limited.⁶ The logical problem

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5. Cf. Kwasi Wiredu, "Toward Decolonizing African Philosophy and Religion," *African Studies Quarterly* 1, no. 4 (1998): <http://africa.ufl.edu/asq/v1/4/3.pdf>; A. K. Fayemi, "Philosophical Problem of Evil: Response to E.O. Oduwole," *Philosophia: International Journal of Philosophy* 41, no. 1 (2012): 1–15; Joyline Gwara and L. Uchenna Ogbonnaya, "Rethinking God's Omnibenevolence and Omnipotence in the Light of the COVID-19 Pandemic: An African Perspective," *Filosofia Theoretica: Journal of African Philosophy, Culture, and Religions* 11, no. 4 (2022): 31–52, <https://dx.doi.org/10.4314/ft.v11i4.3s>; Jonathan O. Chimakonam and Amara E. Chimakonam, "Examining the Logical Argument of the Problem of Evil from an African Perspective" *Religious Studies* 59 (2023): 326–339, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412522000300>; and Ada Agada, "Rethinking the Concept of God and the Problem of Evil from the Perspective of African Thought," *Religious Studies* 59 (2023a): 294–310, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412522000294>. David Hume, *Dialogue concerning natural religion and other writings*, ed. Dorothy Coleman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 73.
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follows from the seeming contradiction of asserting that God is omnipotent, omniscient and omnibenevolent even as he has created an imperfect world with evil in it. This version of the problem of evil states that the idea that an omnipotent God exists is incompatible with the reality of evil in the world. The evidential problem is based on the claim that the reality and variety of evils in the world make it unlikely that the perfect God of the Abrahamic religions exist.⁷ The question of the reality of evil becomes a philosophical problem when one asserts that God is a perfect being who possesses the omni-properties. This is the view of orthodox Christians. It is the traditional theistic conception of God.

Problem of Evil in African Philosophy of Religion

The problem of evil has recently gained traction in African philosophy of religion, a field of African philosophy that explores the concept of God and the relation of God with the world, among other themes.⁸ African philosophers like Gyekye, Oduwale and Njoku have asserted that traditional African societies conceive God in a way similar to the conception of God in Christianity. These philosophers endorse the view of scholars of African Traditional Religion (ATR) like Mbiti, Idowu and Ikenga-Metuh,⁹ who assert that there is an agreement between orthodox Christian and traditional African conceptions of God. If Africans traditionally conceive God as a being that possesses the omni-properties, then the problem of evil also arises in African philosophy of religion. The philosophical challenge, then, becomes accounting for why a God with the omni-properties permits the evil we find in the

7. William Rowe, "The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 16, (1979): 335–341; and Richard Swinburne, *Providence and the Problem of Evil* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998).

8. See: Luis Cordeiro-Rodrigues, and Ada Agada, "African Philosophy of Religion: Concepts of God, Ancestors, and the Problem of Evil," *Philosophy Compass* 17, no. 8 (2022): 1–11, <https://doi.org/10.1111/phc3.12864>.

9. John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (London: Heinemann, 1969); E. Bolaji Idowu, *African Traditional Religion: A Definition* (London: SCM Press, 1973); and Emefie Ikenga-Metuh, *God and Man in African Religion* (London: Geoffrey Chapman. 1981).

world.

Like Western theistic philosophers of religion, the African philosopher Gyekye appeals to the free will argument to account for the perfect God allowing evil in the world. Gyekye investigates traditional Akan religious thought and interrogates Akan proverbs and names for God in the Akan language. He reaches the conclusion that the Akan believe in the existence of an absolute God. He observes that God “is the Absolute Reality, the origin of all things, the absolute ground, the sole and whole explanation of the universe, the source of all existence... Onyame [God] transcends time and is thus free from the limitation of time, an eternity without beginning, without an end.”¹⁰ Since God is good, he gives every human being a good and unalterable destiny before their birth.¹¹ Humans enter the world with a good destiny as well as a free will which they misuse, leading to the commission of moral evil. Gyekye explains natural evil by appealing to the free will of malevolent spirits who cause harm to humans. Now, if God gives humans an unalterable destiny before they are born, it means humans are determined by God to act in certain ways. If human beings are determined, then Gyekye's appeal to the free will argument fails because he does not demonstrate the compatibility of free will and determinism. Additionally, if an all-powerful God created the malevolent spirits, it should be within His power to prevent the malevolent spirits from causing harm without taking away their free will. The spirits may will evil while God prevents their evil will from actually happening since he is omnipotent and omniscient.

The philosopher Oduwale approaches the question of evil from the perspective of Yoruba religious thought. She asserts that the Yoruba conceive God as a perfect being who created everything and sustains the universe. Like Gyekye, Oduwale proposes that God is a perfect being. She notes that God “has absolute authority over

10. Kwame Gyekye, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought: The Akan Conceptual Scheme*. Rev. ed. (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1995), 70.

11. Gyekye, *An essay on African Philosophical Thought*, 113.

all in heaven and earth and is incomparable...absolutely perfect in superlative qualities.”¹² She suggests that God allows evil in the world because evil is a necessary component of the structure of the world and is the complementary side of good. She suggests that without evil there will be no good since both phenomena are in a dialectic relationship. If Oduwole is correct, it will appear that the necessary occurrence of evil restricts God's power. Aware of the seeming futility of pursuing the free will argument to justify God's goodness in the face of the evil in the world, Njoku appeals to God's incomprehensibility. He notes that the Igbo of Southeastern Nigeria call God *Ogbara igbo gharii*, (the Incomprehensible). He observes further that “‘Chukwu', 'Chineke' is a wonderful God– 'Itununya'—and not fully comprehensible...Humans know God in an insignificantly obscure way.”¹³ The appeal to God's hiddenness leaves the problem of evil unresolved.

On the other hand, African philosophers of the limited-God school have asserted that the problem of evil does not really arise in African philosophy of religion because Africans traditionally lack the Christian idea of a perfect God. They believe that proponents of the perfect-God view imported the Christian conception of God into African religious studies and passed it as the authentic view of traditional African societies. Reacting to this perceived imposition of Western religious schemes on African scholarship, Okot p'Bitek¹⁴ asserts that: “African peoples may describe their deities [including God] as 'strong' but not 'omnipotent'; 'wise,' but not 'omniscient'; 'old,' not 'eternal'; 'great,' not 'omnipresent'.” Having interrogated traditional Akan religious thought, Kwasi Wiredu reaches the conclusion that the Akan do not, in fact, believe that God is omnipotent and omnibenevolent. For Wiredu,¹⁵ God's power can be likened to the power of a great potentate; and his

12. Oduwole, *The Dialectics of Ire (goodness) and Ibi (evilness)*, 5.

13. Njoku, *Essays on African Philosophy, Thought, and Theology*, 147.

14. Okot p'Bitek, *Decolonizing African Religions: A Short History of African Religions in Western Scholarship* (New York: Diasporic Africa Press, 2011), 42.

15. Kwasi Wiredu, “Toward Decolonizing African Philosophy and Religion,” *African Studies Quarterly* 1, no. 4 (1998): 41, <http://africa.ufl.edu/asq/v1/4/3.pdf>.

goodness is similar to the goodness of a just and benevolent ancestor.¹⁶ In his words:

On the Akan understanding of things, indeed, God is good in the highest; but his goodness is conceptually of a type with the goodness of a just and benevolent ancestor...The prospect of punishment from God or some lesser being may concentrate the mind on the narrow path of virtue, but it is not this that creates the sense of moral obligation.¹⁷

Wiredu is asserting that while the Akan honour God as the creator, they do not necessarily regard him as an object of worship because the Akan religion is humanistic in its essence. For him, the Akan are anthropocentric rather than theocentric. For Wiredu, God is not omnibenevolent, His goodness being comparable to the goodness of a just ancestor. God's power is limited by the way the world is structured.¹⁸ Accordingly, God cannot prevent the evil that occurs in the world. Evil is part of the structure of the world.

Gwara and Ogbonnaya approach the problem of evil from a logical and ontological perspective that regards the universe as a complementary totality of plural qualities. They believe that traditional African logic supports a dualistic interpretation of reality, whereby binary qualities are in a complementary relationship. The African logical system that they appeal to is the *ezumezu* system which submits the claim that in addition to the traditional truth and falsity values there is a third value which indicates the level of complementary interconnection in a system or in a proposition.¹⁹ Thus, a proposition can be true, false and both true and false,

16. Kwasi Wiredu, "The Moral Foundations of An African Culture," Person and community: Ghanaian Philosophical Studies I, eds. Kwasi Wiredu and Kwame Gyekye, (The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy. 2010), 195.

17. Wiredu, "The Moral Foundations of An African Culture," 195.

18. Wiredu, "Toward Decolonizing African Philosophy and Religion.

19. Gwara and Ogbonnaya, "Rethinking God's Omnibenevolence and Omnipotence in the Light of the COVID-19 Pandemic" 43 – 46.

depending on the context supplied in a particular situation. All entities, including God, operate in the dual mode. No being is absolutely good or evil, for example. Good and evil complement each other. According to Gwara and Ogbonnaya, God possesses the binary properties of good and evil, strength and weakness, benevolence and wickedness. They assert that “inherent in God's benevolence and powerfulness are wickedness and weakness. For instance, if we talk about God's benevolence within the context of African duality theory, we speak of it with reference to God's wickedness. God is benevolent but also wicked. God's wickedness is inherent in his benevolence.”²⁰ Fayemi²¹ has corroborated the claim that God is capable of doing evil. He adopts this view in opposition to Oduwale who believes that the Yoruba conceive God as a perfect being. For Fayemi, the Yoruba God is limited in power, knowledge and goodness and runs the affairs of the world with help from the ubiquitous lesser deities.

While articulating the idea of the limited harmony-God who constantly seeks to balance the amount of good and evil in the world, Jonathan O. Chimakonam and Amara E. Chimakonam write that:

He [God] brings the rain, but also brings the sun. He raises a forest only to blaze it down with fire. He gives a child to a mother and takes it the next day. He creates and destroys not just for the fun of it but for the overarching need to maintain the balance of good and evil.²²

Chimakonam and Chimakonam adopts a stance similar to the stance of Gwara and Ogbonnaya. The harmony-God seeks to sustain the complementary structure of the universe. God eliminating the evil in the world will cause an imbalance in the

20. Gwara and Ogbonnaya, “Rethinking God's Omnibenevolence and Omnipotence in the Light of the COVID-19 Pandemic” 45.

21. Fayemi, “Philosophical Problem of Evil: Response to E.O. Oduwale,” 11.

22. Chimakonam and Chimakonam, “Examining the Logical Argument of the Problem of Evil from An African Perspective,” 334.

structure of the world that leads to cosmic instability. For Chimakonam and Chimakonam,²³ “God is very powerful, but not all-powerful, and may not be the most powerful in all contexts; vastly knowledgeable but not all-knowing, and may not be the most knowledgeable being in all contexts; very good, but not all-good.”

In *Existence and Consolation: Reinventing Ontology, Gnosis and Values in African Philosophy*, Agada describes God as a being that experiences melancholy, an emotion that he regards as exhibiting God's limitedness.²⁴ The emotion of melancholy is grounded in what he calls *mood*, a universal animating principle that expresses itself as the yearning for perfection. God is the highest epitome of *mood* and is imperfect since *mood* itself is imperfect. According to Agada:

God is limited...His limitation is imposed by His very nature as *mood*, as at once intelligence and emotion. The world that God creates is, unsurprisingly, imperfect, manifesting physical and moral evils in the shape of natural disasters, diseases, and the many wicked capabilities in humans that human history has documented in abundance...why does God create at all given that a fatalistic sequence is already guaranteed with evil as one of the outcomes? ... it is in the creative act that He becomes a being of power and glory.²⁵

God knows that the world he is going to create is imperfect, but he creates anyway in the pursuit of His own interest. God yearns for joy and creates as a means of escaping sadness, according to Agada. The implication of this stance is that God suffers just like human beings and is caught up in the tragic cosmic drama, like all

23. Chimakonam and Chimakonam, “Examining the Logical Argument of the Problem of Evil from An African Perspective,” 334.

24. Ada Agada, *Existence and Consolation: Reinventing Ontology, Gnosis and Values in African Philosophy* (St Paul, MN: Paragon House, 2015), 75, 78-80.

25. Ada Agada, “God's Existence and the Problem of Evil in African Philosophy of Religion,” in *Handbook of African Philosophy*, eds. Elvis Imafidon, Mpho Tshivase, and B j ö r n Freter, (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2023b), 571.

other beings.

Dilemma of 'the Perfect, yet Evil in the World God' versus 'the Limited, so Less than Perfect God'

The chapter discovered that the search for a solution to the question of evil in a world created by a divine being by a number of African philosophers of religion created two schools of thought: the perfect-God school and the limited-God school. For the limited-God proponents, God possesses the omni-properties. He is omnipotent, omniscient and omnibenevolent. They try to account for moral and physical evil by appealing to human free will, the activities of malevolent spirits and our limited human cognitive faculty that prevents us from adequately understanding God's mind and His plan for the world. However, the perfect-God theorists fail to demonstrate that there are good reasons for a perfect God allowing evil in the world. If God is omnipotent and omniscient, it should be within his capacity to have ensured that the unalterable destiny he gave humans in the beginning is not compromised by human free will. Gyekye, the major defender of this stance, has not provided a convincing theodicy. The appeal to malevolent spirits to account for physical evil also fails because an omnipotent and omniscient God should have the power and knowledge required to control the activities of the spiritual creatures that he created.

Oduwale's claim that evil is a necessary component of the world contradicts the thesis of God's perfection since God is unable to interfere with the way the world is structured, thus implying His limitation. Njoku's appeal to God's incomprehensibility raises the question of why an omnibenevolent God will refrain from revealing his good reasons for allowing evil to suffering human beings. Accordingly, the perfect-God proponents have failed to resolve the problem of evil in African philosophy of religion.

The limited-God proponents diminish God's powers and make Him less an object of

worship and more an object of pity. There is a problem here because most limited-God proponents concede that God is the creator of the world and is a proper object of worship. Fayemi asserts that God seeks help from lesser deities to run the affairs of the universe. This God also does evil. Agada²⁶ calls God the being who consoles human beings while Chimakonam and Chimakonam²⁷ call God the sustainer of the world and the object of worship. But if God is presented as a suffering God as Agada does and as a being that causes evil, sometimes willfully, as Chimakonam and Chimakonam, Gwara and Ogbonnaya and Fayemi assert, it will appear that the limited God is not in a position to make human existence more meaningful and is not worthy to be the object of human worship.

Conclusion

In this article, we explored the question of the reality of evil in a world created by God as it features in the works of African philosophers of religion like Gyekye, Oduwole, Njoku, Wiredu, Agada, Fayemi, Chimakonam and Chimakonam, and Gwara and Ogbonnaya. We identified two schools of thought, the perfect-God school and the limited-God school. We interrogated the claims of these scholars and found out that while the former fails to provide an adequate theodicy, the latter presents a God so diminished that He cannot be the proper object of worship. Like its western counterpart, African scholarship on the question of evil in the world is stuck in a quagmire. The way out of this *aporia* is difficult to fathom out or tell; but a glimpse of light out of this deadlock suggests that future research may have to focus on a broader analysis of the limitation thesis and its implication for the belief in the existence of God.

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