

A Critical Reconsideration of some Conceptions of Evil and the Atheological Arguments

Abidemi Israel Ogunyomi ¹

and

Emmanuel Adetokunbo Ogundele ²

^{1&2}Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies,
Augustine University, P.M.B. 1010, Ilara-Epe 106101,
Lagos State, Nigeria.

¹abidemi.ogunyomi@augustineuniversity.edu.ng
hillsraelabidemi@gmail.com

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1911-3334>

²adetokunbo.ogundele@augustineuniversity.edu.ng

Abstract

The problem of evil has, for long, been an open-ended discourse in world scholarship, especially in the philosophical circle. It has been engaged by various cultural and intellectual traditions. Accordingly, there are as many conceptions of evil as there are as many cultural civilisations in the world. There are two cogent atheological arguments – logical and evidential – through which the problem of evil has been traditionally formulated. While logical argument, also referred to as deductive argument, insists on the view that the essential attributes of God are contradictory with the reality of evil in the world, evidential argument, also referred to as inductive argument, maintains that all instances and traces of evil in the world make the existence of a morally good God improbable at best. However, using the methods of critical argumentation and rigorous analysis, this paper revisits some enduring conceptions of evil in scholarship with a critical lens. It also attempts a critical discussion of the two atheological arguments and examines the objections of philosophers of religion specifically Alvin Plantinga, who is a

notable defender of the free will argument, and Stephen Wykstra, who is a defender of skeptical theism, to logical and evidential atheological arguments, respectively.

Keywords: Evil, Conceptions, Natural evil, Moral evil, Logical argument, Evidential argument, Freewill defense, Skeptical theism.

Introduction

Human beings find themselves in a strange world which they are constantly trying to understand. In the same strange world which human beings inherited, they experience several enigmatic circumstances and bewildering occurrences which are beyond their imagination. Accordingly, human beings continuously make effort to understand their existential situations and to grapple with their daily experiential challenges. Part of the startling realities that characterize human existence is the problem of evil in the world. The reality of evil in the world is projected by the ineffable calamitous occurrences in nature and suffering which human beings experience on a daily basis.

Scholars of diverse ideological persuasions have tried to conceptualize and explain the problem of evil and human suffering. However, mere conceptualizations and explanations seem not to be adequate for the understanding of the problem of evil and human suffering.¹ They go a little or no way at all in proffering genuine solution to the problem. This, presumably, is what makes John Hick to contend that “no amount of intellectual justification can hope to assuage the actual pains, sorrows and sufferings of the human mind.”² The reality of suffering has led to

^{1.} Abidemi I. Ogunyomi “The Existential Implications of Evil Suppressing Measures in Yoruba Philosophy.” *Caribbean Journal of Philosophy* 14, no.1 (2022.), 90. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/365925642_The_Existential_Implications_of_Evil_Suppressing_Measures_in_Yoruba_Philosophy?

^{2.} John Hick, *Philosophy of Religion*. 4th edition (U.S.A: Prentice-Hall Inc, 1990) 55.

various other problems such as the problem of the existence of God and the nature, attributes and characteristics of such God. In the Judeo-Christian belief system for instance, various arguments and counterarguments have ensued in the attempt to either justify or indict God for the existence of evil in the world and the supposed all-positive attributes of a creationistic God. It has also led to the metaphysical question about the origin of the world and its ultimate constituent in philosophy and philosophy of religion. This has also generated such ontological concepts as “beings”, “being in itself” “ultimate reality”³ and many other relevant metaphysical concepts. Accordingly, this paper discusses the idea of evil, exploring different conceptions of the problem, its causes and how human suffering can be dissipated or minimized from various intellectual traditions. It discusses the question about the existence of a good God in relation to the presence of evil in the world; it also critically discusses two philosophical arguments from evil namely logical and evidential arguments.

Conceptions of Evil: A Critical Survey

The presence of evil in the world is a serious problem that has caught the attention of scholars of diverse cultural extractions and intellectuals of different ideological persuasions. On the one hand, it is a metaphysical problem that has to do with the question of existence or being. This also connects it directly to the problem of God's existence in the presence of evil in philosophy of religion. On the other hand, the problem of evil is a big existentialist problem as it has to do with the reality of human suffering and the need to make meaning out of human existence. Against this background, there are various conceptions and interpretations of the idea of evil.

Novelists, poets, dramatist, philosophers, and various other intellectual traditions have engaged (and are still engaging) the problem of evil and human suffering in the world alike. In addition

³. Michael Tooley, “The problem of evil.” *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*. Plato.stanford.edu. 2015, (Accessed 27 April, 2024.)

to this, the need to explain the origin of evil and human suffering and ensure human happiness is a central concern of the Manicheans, Buddhists, Existentialists, Stoics, Epicureans and various other philosophical schools of thought. Perhaps, this is what makes Alvin Plantinga to submit that it may be difficult, if not impossible to give a clear and useful definition of the philosophical, as opposed, say, to the literary way of approaching this theme.⁴ Even in the philosophical circle, it is doubtful if there is a unanimous conception. That is why it is misleading to speak of the problem of evil as if it is typically presented in a unified way.⁵ However, before digging into the various conceptions of the problem of evil, it is necessary to present an elucidation of the idea of evil itself so as to have a clear picture of the concept in question. How then do we define evil? Or, put differently, what do we mean when we say something is evil?

Philosophers do not agree on the range or scope of occurrences that can be categorized as evil. This is because most of them include what many of them exclude from the scope of evil. As a result of this, it is difficult to present the final list of such occurrences that can be straightjacketed or subsumed under the umbrella of evil and those that are not qualified to bear the label. Daryl Koehn, for instance, acknowledges different conceptions of evil and different dimensions that the understanding of the concept has taken for different philosophers and different historical epochs or religious traditions by identifying two broad approaches or traditions on the understanding of the term. The first approach is the moralist approach, while the second is the wisdom approach.⁶ The moralist approach understands evil as a violative vice arising from the corruption of the will or malfunction of reason and resulting in violence, malice or harm. Philosophers like Aristotle

⁴ Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom and Evil* (USA: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1977), 3.

⁵ Kirk Lougheed, Motsamai Molefe, and Thaddeus Metz, *African Philosophy of Religion and Western Monotheism* (United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2024), 30.

⁶ **Daryl Koehn**, *The Nature of Evil* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 1.

and Immanuel Kant, in the opinion of Koehn, are notable advocates of the moralist approach.⁷ The second approach holds a totally different conception of evil. For the wisdom approach, malice, violence, and vices are not evil in themselves but mere symptoms of evil. This approach understands evil as “human suffering caused by our lack of self-knowledge: we mistakenly identify the self with something that it is not.”⁸ To further clarify the differences between the moralist and the wisdom traditions, Koehn presents different definitions of the of evil. According to him,

The oldest Western religious conceptions of evil have little to do with malice and everything to do with painful frustration. *Kakía*, the New Testament Greek word for evil, refers to anything that impedes human thriving—sickness, disease, loss, misfortune. The early Christian writer Valentinus defined evil as anguish and terror. The ancient Hebrew word for evil — *ra* — similarly equates evil with identity-threatening anxiety, a sense of worthlessness, and sadness. Paul Ricoeur has argued that the early Hebrews thought our primordial experience of evil was one of dread. These views are consistent with the views of ancient tribal peoples who identified evil with illness and death, not with malice or trespass. Sandra Bloom goes so far as to claim that “in every culture, evil has been associated with calamity, misfortune, sorrow, and suffering and, therefore, with traumatic experience.” In all the early views, natural cataclysms or accidents, as

^{7.} Daryl Koehn, *The Nature of Evil* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 2-3.

^{8.} Daryl Koehn, *The Nature of Evil* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 2-3.

well as human actions, qualify as evil insofar as they cause human beings to suffer.⁹

The above reading buttresses the point about the difference between the ideological stance which understands evil as malice and trespass and the ideological stance that understands it as anything that brings anguish or suffering to human beings. This includes the kind of suffering that ensues from both natural or normal processes of the universe and moral activities of human beings. Koehn's elucidation of the different understanding of the concept of evil shows how difficult it is to present a grand definition of the term. Nonetheless, as difficult as this task seems to be, we can present a reasonable account of the idea of evil or what we mean when we say something is evil, given the various definitions of the term exposed by Koehn. We can then consider what is common to those conceptions and make an extrapolation even for other possible conceptions of evil that are not immediately before us now. Accordingly, evil, as it is, can be said to be any occurrence, action, incidence, or circumstance – moral or natural – that brings sorrow, tears, anguish, suffering, misfortune, unpalatability and inconveniences to human beings. This understanding of evil, however, appears to be anthropocentric in nature. This is because the reality of suffering and unpalatable occurrences in the world is not limited or restricted to only human beings – animals and other living organisms also partake in the reality of evil and suffering. In fact, this is the major weakness of the existential conception of evil which has the following formulation:

- (1) Human beings are in a world where there is evil
- (2) The presence of evil in the world positions a great hindrance to the happiness of human beings
- (3) Human beings make all efforts

⁹ Daryl Koehn, *The Nature of Evil* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 15.

to make their existential situation better, thereby avoiding evil (4) However, evil is unavoidable, leaving human beings persistently stranded, optionless and hopeless in existence.¹⁰

Existential conception of evil places human beings at the centre of the universe and assumes them to be the only important beings whose experiences are worth considering. This conception rules out the possibility of extending commiseration to, or explaining the experiences of non-human animals. We may, therefore, understand evil as any incidence that brings suffering and sorrow to living organisms or entities with perceptive abilities.

The view of koehn that the ancient tribal peoples identify evil with illness and death, is further substantiated by John Mbiti. Mbiti observes that ancient tribal peoples of Africa identify evil with illness and death. However, he recognizes that these ancient tribal peoples have different explanations for the origin of evil. The *Ila*, according to Mbiti, believe that God is always good. As such, evil does not originate from Him; the *Ashante* hold the belief that God created the possibility of good and evil and allows human beings to freely choose between them; the *Vugusu* believe that evil originates from a derailed divinity which God initially created good. This thought is similar to the Judeo-Christian explanation of the origin of sin, hence of evil. Some other ancient tribal peoples of Africa regard evil such as death, illness, calamities, epidemics, locust, and so on as divinities.¹¹ Hence, Mbiti remarks that “in

¹⁰. Abidemi I. Ogunyomi “The Existential Implications of Evil Suppressing Measures in Yoruba Philosophy.” *Caribbean Journal of Philosophy* 14, no.1 (2022.), 93. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/365925642_The_Existential_Implications_of_Evil_Suppressing_Measures_in_Yoruba_Philosophy?

¹¹. John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (London: Heinemann, 1969) 204.

nearly all African societies, it is thought that the spirits are either the origin of evil, or agents of evil.”¹²

The cause of evil, according to the *Bavenda*, is God. They understand evil to be a form of punishment. Accordingly, they believe that God can punish the whole people with locusts, flood and other natural disasters or calamities, if any of their chiefs offends against God (Mbiti 1969, 206.) In this wise, evil and all forms of suffering can proceed from God to human beings. However, such is not regarded as evil in the real sense of the term but as punishment for a given offence or sin. Apart from the ancient tribal peoples of Africa considered by Mbiti, there are some intellectual movements in the history of philosophy (especially in the Post-Aristotelian philosophy) who have different understanding and conceptions of the problem of evil. Some of these intellectual movements are Stoicism and Epicureanism.

The Stoics believe in the gradual unfold of natural events and this belief is enshrined in their conviction that the world as we experience it together with its various occurrences, is driving towards a purpose. They have a teleological understanding that views every event as hanging to a purpose or moving to a particular direction. This view also gives credence to the notion of causality – the position that there is no accidental happening in nature. Accordingly, the Stoics enjoin human beings to flow with the natural unfold of events whether evil, or good. Against this background, the Stoics are least bothered or perturbed by the problem of evil as we have it in the world – for them, it is part of the natural order of the universe which human beings just have to bear with in order to be happy. As such, for the Stoics, human beings ought not to tamper with whatever occurrences that happen in nature. This is because they are meant to serve certain purposes.¹³

Nevertheless, when one considers the enormity of evil and

^{12.} John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (London: Heinemann, 1969) 204.

^{13.} Godfrey Ozumba and Michael Ukah, *A Handbook of Ancient Western Philosophy* (London and Calabar: Logic Option Ltd, 2014), 117-118.

human suffering in the world and the kind of calmness which the Stoics enjoin human beings to display towards the reality of evil, one finds the Stoic prescription for combating such pressing existential problem appalling and shocking. The problem of evil is beyond what human beings can fold arms about or consider mere unfold of the natural order of the universe in that some instances of suffering are clearly pointless and unwarranted. This then brings us back to the question of God or creator so to say which, in the first place, sets the world on motion towards a particular purpose. One is then compelled to ask what that purpose is and why the existence of evil is so fundamental to the realization of such purpose. The Stoics unfortunately do not address this question as it is absolutely unnecessary in their view.

The Epicureans on the other hand, express a different opinion on the problem of evil. For the Epicureans, evil, pain and suffering are real in the world. However, a pleasurable life should be the ultimate pursuit of all human beings. There are temporary pains and sufferings that lead to greater and long-lasting pleasure and there are temporary states of pleasure that lead to greater and long-lasting pains. Human beings, according to the Epicureans, ought to endure temporary pains and sufferings that lead to long-lasting pleasure and avoid temporary pleasure that leads to long-lasting pains. However, pains, evils and sufferings that are not likely to generate pleasure should be avoided all together.¹⁴

The problem with the Epicurean perspective is that it focuses entirely on the existence of moral evil, which leads to pain and suffering while ignoring the reality of natural evil. Human beings are not always in the position to avoid natural evil, which may bring about pain and suffering the way they can choose to avoid moral evil. This is because natural evil happens haphazardly and contingently. In addition, moral evil is also difficult to avoid because it proceeds from other agents, physical or non-physical.

Apart from the Existentialists, the Stoics and the Epicureans,

¹⁴. Godfrey Ozumba and Michael Ukah, *A Handbook of Ancient Western Philosophy* (London and Calabar: Logic Option Ltd, 2014), 116-117.

another school of thought that expresses a different view on the problem of evil and human suffering is Buddhism. In fact, the reality of evil in the world and how human suffering can be minimized is the main subject matter or preoccupation of Buddhism. The Buddhist school of thought was propagated by Siddhartha Gautama, a prince, who was confined in a palace by his father, where he enjoyed and experienced a ceaseless life of pleasure for about sixteen years until he was able to explore and survey his father's kingdom through excursions. His various encounters in the course of his excursions around his father's kingdom however, marked an important turning point in his life. Buddha saw a number of unpleasant situations that characterize human existence such as old age, sickness, death, and so on and concluded that the entire human existence is characterized by suffering. However, what gets human life more complicated is the endless attitude of craving. For human beings to reduce suffering and evil in existence, therefore, Buddha enjoins that human beings live a life of total detachment from material things through his four noble truths which will help human beings to reduce necessary crave for material things.

Nevertheless, like Epicureanism, Buddha's solution to the problem of evil excludes natural evil and focuses more on moral evil; hence, it is insufficient. This is because mere detachment from material things or reduction in the rate at which one craves for worldly things cannot, in any way, prevent such natural occurrences as diseases, old age, death, and so on, which Buddha himself categorises as evil.

Manicheanism is another philosophico-religious school of thought that provides an explanation concerning the origin of evil. For the Manicheans, there are two principles in the universe: the principle of light or good and the principle of darkness or evil. These principles are eternally in conflict and their conflict is reflected in human life. The principle of good or light is represented by the soul and the principle of darkness and evil is

represented by the body.¹⁵ Two different deities are responsible for the existence of each principle. *Ormuzed* is responsible for the principle of light and good while *Ahrima* is responsible for the principle of darkness and evil. Both are, however, mixed in an eternal conflict. This explains why there is evil and good in the universe.¹⁶

The problem with this line of thought is that we do not have any evidence to believe that there are just two principles in nature that are responsible for evil and good. There may be one, three, four or even five. Apart from that, evil and good are polar concepts like male and female, right and wrong and many other polar concepts which are too numerous to mention. If we are to agree with the Manichean line of thought, we will have to suppose that different gods are responsible for the occurrence of each polar concept. In that case, the god that creates male for instance, will be different from the one that creates female. Eventually, we will have many gods than necessary that will be responsible for the reality of all these polar concepts. This is however what William of Ockham cautions us against. Ockham cautions against an unnecessary duplication or multiplication of entities. This exactly is what the Manichean explanation for the origin of evil and good is likely going to drag us into.

Moreover, human beings do not have the same conception of what is good and what is evil. Some people regard as evil what some regard as non-evil. It then becomes a problem how exactly we can clearly identify or classify actions under each of the two principles. Corroborating this view, Langtry Bruce argues that there is no clear-distinction between evil and non-evil.¹⁷ This is because philosophers disagree on the range of incidences or actions that constitute evil. Punishment, for instance (especially

¹⁵. Samuel E. Stumpf and James Fiester, *Socrates to Sartre and Beyond: A History of Philosophy*. 7th edition (London: Kenneth King, 2003), 130-139.

¹⁶. G. A. Oshitelu, *Religion, God and Evil: Issues in Philosophy and Religion* (Ibadan: Hope Publications, 2010), 76-77.

¹⁷. Bruce Langtry, *God, the Best and Evil* (U.S.A: Oxford University press, 2008), 44.

capital punishment), can be said to be evil. But it remains debatable if we can consistently maintain that capital punishment is evil even when people legally deserve it. Far different from this, Plantinga categorizes certain contingent or mechanistic occurrences such as being stranded in a desert with a car whose engine has gotten knocked or whose fuel-tank is absolutely empty as evil.¹⁸ If being stranded in a desert can be regarded as evil, then the range of incidents that qualify to be described as evil becomes inexhaustible. That is why Tamunosiki Ogan contends that “the ambiguity (of evil) is underscored by the fact that people tend to explain it from their varying life experiences. Thus, there are no univocal definitions that exhaust its complex nature since human experiences are quite distinct, relative and unique”¹⁹

Despite the fact that philosophers have different understanding of what constitutes or does not constitute evil, many of them agree on two basic classifications of evil.²⁰ On the one hand, they identify what is called natural evil. This type of evil results from the normal processes of nature. It includes such disasters as earthquake, flood, famine, drought, diseases, death, volcanoes, tidal waves and so on.

In addition to this type of evil, Henry McCloskey attaches a longer list of privations such as blindness, deafness, insanity imbecility, senility; degeneration and aging; the agony suffered by preys of carnivorous animals; the pain of childbearing; diseases such as poliomyelitis, diphtheria, cholera, yellow fever, the bubonic plague, tetanus, malaria, tuberculosis, cancer, paralyzing stroke, brain tumor, and so on.²¹

All these are believed to be observable instances of natural evil that human beings suffer and over which they scarcely have any

¹⁸. Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom and Evil* (USA: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1977), 20.

¹⁹. Tamunosiki V. Ogan, “Alvin Plantinga on the Problem of Evil: An Examination.” *International Multi-Disciplinary Journal* 12, no. 2 (2018): 46, 50.

²⁰. Bruce Langtry, *God, the Best and Evil* (U.S.A: Oxford University press, 2008), 42-44.

²¹. Henry J. McCloskey, *God and Evil* (Netherlands: Springer, 1974), 13-16.

control. It should be noted that human beings are not directly responsible for natural evil. Alvin Plantinga, however, argues that natural evil can be reduced to moral evil in the broad sense of it if it could be established that other lesser supernatural forces instead of God are responsible for them.²²

However, this is a matter of mere supposition. Natural evil, in as much as human beings cannot be held responsible for their happening, because they are totally helpless in preventing them, remain natural or at best, supernatural even if other lesser malevolent deities other than God are responsible for it. They are the awry emergences or contingent happenings in the course of nature. It is this type of evil that also characterizes Ben Jackson's description of the suffering experienced by the poor people of Ethiopia when he says that

Row upon row of kahki tents are spread out across the plain, stretching into the distance. It looks like an army encampment, or some giant Boy Scout jamboree that has been picked up and dumped on the hot, dusty African plain. But the mirage does not last long. As I arrived at the camp in July 1985, I saw painful images of famine and refugee life: the grief of losing close relatives, suppressed in the bid to carry on, but seen in a momentary expression of pain; the sense of loss and shame at having to abandon one's livelihood and home, to be reduced to living on hand-outs in a foreign land; the constant queuing for ration cards, food water; the regimented lines of crowded tents; people seeing their sick children having to be treated, not for any particular disease, but for hunger.²³

²². Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom and Evil* (USA: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1977), 57-59.

²³. Ben Jackson, *Poverty and the Planet: a question of Survival* (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 1990), 32.

The reality of natural evil in existence is undeniable. Human beings become homeless as a result of flood; people get killed as a result of earthquake, thunder, famine, drought and all manner of unpleasant occurrences that emanate from the natural processes of the universe. On the other hand, there is what is called moral evil. This type of evil occurs as a result of human's inhumanity and wickedness towards their fellow human beings. Alvin Plantinga describes this type of evil as the ones "which result from human stupidity, arrogance and cruelty."²⁴ Moral evil includes war, genocide, accidents, negligence and all sort of human behavior that inflict direct or indirect pain on other human beings.²⁵ Dostoevsky in his *The Brothers Karamazov*, presents an evocative picture of moral evil thus:

By the way, a Bulgarian I met lately in Moscow, Ivan went on ... told me about the crimes committed by Turks in all parts of Bulgaria through fear of a general rising of the Slavs. They burn villages, murder, outrage women and children, and nail their prisoners by the ears to the fences, leave them till morning, and in the morning hang them - all sorts of things, you can't imagine. People talk sometimes of bestial cruelty, but that is a great injustice and insult to the beasts; a beast can never be so cruel as a man, so artistically cruel. The tiger only tears and gnaws and that's all he can do. He would never think of nailing people by the ears, even if he were able to do it. These Turks took a pleasure in torturing children too; cutting the unborn child from the mother's womb and tossing babies up in the air and catching them on the points of their bayonets before their mother's eyes. Doing it

²⁴. Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom and Evil* (USA: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1977), 8.

²⁵. Henry J. McCloskey, *God and Evil* (Netherlands: Springer, 1974), 16-19.

before the mothers' eyes was what gave zest to the amusement. Here is another scene that I thought very interesting. Imagine a trembling mother with her baby in her arms, a circle of invading Turks around her. They've planned a diversion: they pet the baby to make it laugh. They succeed, the baby laughs. At that moment a Turk points a pistol four inches from the baby's face and blows out its brains. Artistic, wasn't it? By the way, Turks are particularly fond of sweet things, they say.²⁶

The above characterization is a practical illustration of moral evil. It shows how callous and wicked human beings can be towards their kind. There are so many instances of moral evil around the world especially in Africa. For instance, the current social insecurity in Nigeria that arose from the unwarranted killing of innocent people by the Fulani herdsmen and the Boko Haram terrorists also fits into the category of moral evil. In addition to this are the phenomena of ritual killings, banditry, kidnapping, indiscriminate murder, poverty, and mass hunger as a result of bad governance that characterize the reality of the current Nigerian state.

Moreover, the xenophobic incident in South Africa which eventuated in the killing of many Africans, especially the scene where a Mozambican was practically set aflame while some South Africans were watching and covering the agonizing victim with their phones, is a paradigmatic epitome of moral evil. This incident was widely discussed and criticized on the social media and in newspapers at the international and local levels. This type of attitude is also reflective in the Nigerian context, especially in what is famously described as “jungle justice” where human beings are severely tortured, lynched and killed for piffling

²⁶. Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*. Trans. C. Garnett London: Heinemann, 1945), 244.

offences like blasphemy, theft, adultery, witchcraft, and so on. However, the question relating to God on the reality of moral evil is: if God is believed to have created the universe and everything in it including human beings, and if he is always morally good and perfect as the Judeo-Christian scholars claim, then how can the work of a morally perfect God, especially human beings who are believed to be made in his image, be that callous, violent and wicked? This argument will be discussed in the subsequent sections under the logical and evidential arguments from evil and the various forms of theistic theodicies.

The Reality of Evil and the Question of God's Existence

The reality of evil and human suffering in the world is one of the potent challenges to the question of God's existence. According to William Role, it is the most formidable of the difficulties to theistic belief.²⁷ The problem however, is not about the existence of God per say but about the huge discrepancy between the existence of evil and the attributes of infinite goodness and moral perfection that He is believed to possess. Most of the Judeo-Christian Medieval philosophers like St. Augustine, St. Thomas Aquinas, St. Anselm, John Scotus Erigena, Moses Maimonides and the rest of them dedicated the bulk of their intellectual writings to the defense of the existence of God and the ascription of positive attributes to Him. Most of them agree that the world as we have it was brought about or created by God. Hence, we have such arguments as the first cause argument, teleological argument, cosmological argument, argument from design and so on.

It is often asked, if God, together with all his attributes as the all-powerful, all-knowing and all-good, is said to have brought this world that we know about, then, what accounts for the existence of evil in the world? This makes Bertrand Russell to claim that if he were to possess all the supposed attributes of God such as omnipotence, omnipresence, omnibenevolence, omniscience,

²⁷ William Rowe, *Philosophy of Religion: An Introduction*. Fourth edition (Australia: Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 2007), 112.

etcetera, he would have created a world far better than the one in which we are.

This also raises the question of possible worlds together with the various problems that are associated with it. Hence, Leibniz argues that this actual world, despite all the obvious and concrete imperfections in it, is the best of all possible worlds that God can hope to create.²⁸

Leibniz's assertion is not, however, convincing. If God possesses all the attributes that He is believed to have possessed, and if there are other possible worlds apart from the actual one in which we are, then, it makes no sense to conclude that this very world that we know, despite its defects, is the best that could be offered by a being who possesses the three attributes. This makes the ancient questions asked by Epicurus about the attributes of God and the origin of evil more compelling in this current discussion. Epicurus' questions concerning God and evil are: *"Is He willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then He is impotent. Is He able but not willing? Then He is malevolent. Is He both able and willing? Whence then is evil?"*²⁹

The discrepancy between the attributes of God and the reality of evil in the world worries Epicurus. As such, his inquisitiveness is understandable as the supposed attributes of God contradict the experiential realities in the actual world of human beings, which God is believed to have created. In fact, Epicurus' question, "whence comes evil", according to G. A. Oshitelu, is the core question at the heart of the problem of evil and a host of other related questions that are attached to it cannot be meaningfully settled until that very core question is answered.³⁰ David Hume also sees the need to first answer Epicurus' question in order to make an intelligible discussion out of the problem of evil.

²⁸. G. A. Oshitelu, *Religion, God and Evil: Issues in Philosophy and Religion* (Ibadan: Hope Publications, 2010), 122.

²⁹. Joseph. I. Omoregbe, *A philosophical Look at Religion* (Lagos: Joja Educational Research and Publishers Ltd, 1993), 134.

³⁰. G. A. Oshitelu, *Religion, God and Evil: Issues in Philosophy and Religion* (Ibadan: Hope Publications, 2010), 122.

However, the two basic atheological arguments from evil – logical and evidential arguments are committed to the fundamental question of the origin of evil and the consistency or compatibility of the existence of evil in the world with the existence of a morally good God as the theists claim. These two arguments shall be discussed in the subsequent section.

Traditional Atheological Arguments from Evil: Logical and Evidential Arguments

There are two atheological or atheistic arguments from evil. The first takes a deductive and syllogistic approach to the analysis of the problem of evil and asserts that the existence of evil is incompatible with the existence of a God who is all powerful (Omnipotent), all knowing (Omniscience) and morally good (Omnibenevolent). This argument is called logical or incompatibility argument.³¹

Some of the philosophers that uphold this incompatibility thesis, according to William Rowe and Michael Tooley, are John Mackie, H. J. McCloskey, H. D. Aiken, and the rest of them. Alvin Plantinga can also be classified with those who employ the logical or deductive approach to the analysis of the problem of evil. However, while the former philosophers argue that the existence of evil is incompatible and inconsistent with the existence of a wholly good God, Plantinga argues that there is no contradiction (in the formal sense of the term) with the existence of a wholly good God and the existence of evil in the world. Mackie vehemently upholds the inconsistency thesis when he argues that:

A more telling criticism can be made by way of the traditional problem of evil. Here it can be shown, not that religious beliefs lack rational support, but that they are positively irrational,

³¹. William Rowe, *Philosophy of Religion: An Introduction*. Fourth edition (Australia: Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 2007), 112-113; Michael Tooley, “The problem of evil.” *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*. Plato.stanford.edu. 2015, (Accessed 27 April, 2024.)

that the several parts of the essential theological doctrine are inconsistent with one another.³²

He continues to present his reasons for the allegation of inconsistency, demonstrating the structure of the logical argument from evil. According to Mackie:

In its simplest form, the problem is this: God is omnipotent; God is wholly good; yet evil exists. There seems to be some contradiction between these three propositions, so that if any two of them were true the third would be false. But at the same time all three are essential parts of most theological positions; the theologian, it seems, at once must adhere and cannot consistently adhere to all three.³³

Plantinga, however, argues that most of the philosophers who maintain the incompatibility thesis fail to justify or demonstrate the contradictions. In other words, he sees their thesis as a mere assertion instead of a genuine argument. He especially takes John Mackie up on this very issue of the inconsistency of the goodness of God and the existence of evil in his book titled *God, Freedom and Evil*, maintaining that both explicit and implicit contradictions cannot be established between the existence of evil and the existence of a morally good God. Though he mentions that Mackie himself realizes that in order to establish a formal or explicit contradiction, one needs to add some premises, principles or

³². John Mackie, "Evil and Omnipotence." In *The Philosophy of Religion*, edited by B. Mitchell (London: Oxford university press, 1971), 92.

³³. John Mackie, "Evil and Omnipotence." In *The Philosophy of Religion*, edited by B. Mitchell (London: Oxford university press, 1971), 92-93.

quasi-logical rules to the argument.³⁴ Plantinga argues that the addition of the so called quasi-logical rules does not prove the inconsistency of the existence of evil and the existence of a morally good God. He demonstrates this using the theistic argument from Free Will Defense which states that God, though omnipotent, could not have created a universe containing moral good without also creating one containing moral evil.³⁵ It is the view that even if God is Omnipotent, He may not have been able to create a world that is filled with good without certain traces of evil.

The Free Will Defense is predicated on the assumption that freedom is incompatible with determinism and that it is logically incompatible for an agent to act freely and to have been caused to act at the same time.³⁶ Rowe also shares the view of Plantinga but while Plantinga thinks that the free will defense argument succeeds in displacing the allegation of contradiction from the logical argument from evil,³⁷ Rowe is skeptical about the success of the free will defense.³⁸ For this reason, both Plantinga and Rowe, from the perspective of freewill defense argument, are critiques of the logical argument from evil.

However, Alvin Plantinga, being a defender of the freewill argument, seems not to have taken two of the attributes of God seriously. Omnipotence, for instance, can be understood as the power to do all things without exception while Omniscience can be

^{34.} Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom and Evil* (USA: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1977), 31; Alvin Plantinga, *God and Other Minds* (Ithaca: Cornell, 1967), 121; John Mackie, "Evil and Omnipotence." In *The Philosophy of Religion*, edited by B. Mitchell (London: Oxford university press, 1971), 93; Henry J. McCloskey, *God and Evil* (Netherlands: Springer, 1974), 7.

^{35.} Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom and Evil* (USA: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1977), 31-34

^{36.} William Rowe, *Philosophy of Religion: An Introduction*. Fourth edition (Australia: Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 2007), 117-118.

^{37.} Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom and Evil* (USA: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1977), 64

^{38.} William Rowe, *Philosophy of Religion: An Introduction*. Fourth edition (Australia: Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 2007), 119.

understood as the possession of the knowledge of the past, present and the distant future, and to be cognizant of the actual and the potential. By maintaining that God could not have created a universe filled only with moral good without evil, defenders of the freewill argument reduce the omnipotence of God. Also, granted that it is impossible for God to create such a universe, His supposed ability to know all things could have helped Him in making a better and informed decision on whether or not to create a world where both good and evil cannot but exist.

The second argument uses an inductive approach, presenting instances of concrete or actual evil in the world to rebut or arrive at a conclusion that the existence of an all-powerful, all-knowing and all-good God is at best, probable.³⁹ This argument is referred to as the evidential argument from evil. To put it in Rowe's words, "the evidential form of the problem of evil is the view that the variety and profusion of evil in our world, although perhaps not logically inconsistent with the existence of the theistic God, provides, nevertheless, rational support for atheism, for the belief that the theistic God does not exist."⁴⁰

The advocates of the evidential argument from evil recognize that there are some instances of evil or human and animal suffering that lead to greater good and that evil sometimes needs to ensue in order to unveil good. This does not deny the fact that those occurrences are evil or strip them off from being qualified as instances of evil and intense human or animal suffering but that these instances of intense suffering are meant to ultimately serve some good purposes. However, "the evidential form of the problem of evil is based on instances of intense human or animal

³⁹. Emmanuel A. Ogundele, and Abidemi I. Ogunyomi, "Evil and the problem of Justification: Re-examining some Traditional Theodicies." *Dominican University Journal of Humanities* 2, no. 1 (2021): 34 https://www.researchgate.net/publication/359393107_Evil_and_the_Problem_of_Justification_Re-examining_Some_Traditional_Theodicies?

⁴⁰. William Rowe, *Philosophy of Religion: An Introduction*. Fourth edition (Australia: Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 2007), 113, 119.

suffering that apparently serve no good purpose at all”⁴¹ In fact, for the evidentialists, if some instances of pain, evil and suffering which are experienced by human beings, could be reasonably argued to be divine punishment for certain human misbehavior, or necessary steps to greater good, the phenomenon of animal suffering remains unjustifiable. What reasons may justify situations where animals are caught in wild fire which resulted from lightning or thunder and wriggle in pain for seven to eight days for instance before dying? This instance of natural evil seems to be unjustifiable as no greater good or pleasure could be imagined as a warrant for the suffering and agony which such animals passed through for eight days before finally dying.

There are two important objections to the evidential argument from evil. The first is called skeptical theism while the second is a theodicy. The claim of the skeptical theists is that human knowledge is limited and finite. As a result of this, it cannot have the knowledge of the reason why God allows human and animal suffering – even the ones which do not seem to serve any purpose from the inspection of human reason.

The second objection presents a theodicy that aims to justify the existence of evil with the existence of a good God. Stephen Wykstra is an advocate of skeptical theism. For him, the fact that the finiteness of human reason prevents them from knowing the good divine intention for allowing evil and suffering does not presuppose the absence or non-existence of such intention.⁴² John, Hick on the other hand, attempts to justify the existence of evil and suffering by arguing that it is the process of soul-making, by which

⁴¹. William Rowe, *Philosophy of Religion: An Introduction*. Fourth edition (Australia: Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 2007), 113, 120.

⁴². Stephen Wykstra, “The Humean Obstacle to Evidential Arguments from Suffering: On Avoiding the Evils of Appearance.” *International Journal for the Philosophy of Religion* 16, no 1. (1984): 73-93; Rowe, William. “Evil and the Theistic Hypothesis: A Response to Wykstra.” *International Journal for the Philosophy of Religion* 16, no 1. (1984): 95-100; William Rowe, *Philosophy of Religion: An Introduction*. Fourth edition (Australia: Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 2007), 121- 123.

he means that human suffering and evil are necessary for their moral and spiritual development, and their sympathy towards other men. This “long travail of soul-making process” ultimately qualifies them to be sons and daughters of God.⁴³ In this case, a world devoid of evil and suffering would be a world of unnecessary indulgence which would contribute nothing positive to human moral and spiritual development.

William Rowe, David Hume, Paul Draper, Michael Tooley, J. S. Mill and a host of others, are notable defenders of the evidential argument from evil. For these philosophers, the presence of all manner of suffering which results from the existence of concrete or observable evil in the world such as earthquake, war, diseases, famine, drought, and so on renders the existence of a morally good God, at best, probable. In other words, it makes it most likely that such a being does not exist. According to Matz Lou, J.S. Mill wrote a letter which he titled “Enlightened Infidelity” to George Jacob Holyoake's secularist paper: “*The Reasoner and Herald of Progress*” prior to the publication of his *Three Essays on Religion* that

It is philosophically permissible for people to form conjectures about a creator of the universe based on the inclinations of their imaginations as long as the conjectures do not contradict what is known; however, the course of nature demonstrates that this creator cannot be perfect and just, given the imperfections in nature and the amount of suffering and evil.⁴⁴

It is clear from the above that Mill belongs to the evidentialist

⁴³. John H. Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*. Reissued Edition (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 256; Emmanuel A. Ogundele, and Abidemi I. Ogunyomi, “Evil and the problem of Justification: Re-examining some Traditional Theodicies.” *Dominican University Journal of Humanities* 2, no. 1 (2021): 38-41.

⁴⁴. John S. Mill, *Three Essays on Religion*. Edited by L. J. Matz (Canada: Broadview Editions, 2009), 28-29.

camp on the problem of evil. He finds it difficult to reconcile what is evident in the actual world of human beings with the formulations or conceptions of people about a creator that is infinitely morally good and perfect. Lou as well accounts that Mill's experience of the death of his relatives – his father and two of his brothers – makes him to conclude that “the theist's view of a perfect maker is contradicted by the realities of nature, and to hold the belief in an unknown afterlife as a terrifying, but improbable notion”⁴⁵ The main argument of the evidentialists as to the improbability of the existence of a morally good God is predicated on the observable instances of evil and human suffering in the world.

Michael Tooley, being a notable defender of the evidential argument, criticizes Plantinga for stoutly overlooking the actual experiential conditions of pain, suffering and anguish which human beings grapple with every day while focusing on the analysis of language and arguments, a purely abstract endeavor having little or no bearing on the actual existential conditions of human beings to demonstrate the non-contradictory nature of the claim that the existence of a morally perfect or good God is consistent with the existence of evil in the world. Hence, Plantinga, in Tooley's perspective, distances himself from the real problem of evil or human suffering as it directly affects human beings and animals, unfolding unimaginable constraints on their constant efforts to be happy in the actual world of experience. This exercise, according to Tooley, drives Plantinga to the erroneous submission that once it is deductively or logically provable that the existence of a morally perfect being is consistent with the existence of evil, then, the philosophical problem of evil is resolved and the whole bulk of existential experiences of various instances of evil is no longer a philosophical but a pastoral

⁴⁵. John S. Mill, *Three Essays on Religion*. Edited by L. J. Matz (Canada: Broadview Editions, 2009), 29.

problem.⁴⁶ Tooley's argument is that the existence of a good God is dubitable since we cannot imagine any greater good for which God will permit greater evil when the prevention of such evil is not necessarily a hindrance to the realization of the greater good.⁴⁷

Tooley's argument has the same structure with William Rowe's evidential argument from evil which we have discussed earlier. Nevertheless, the objection of the skeptical theists to the evidential argument from evil seems to be very weak. If there are certain divine intentions or reasons for the reality of evil in the world, it does not follow that they must be unknowable to human beings as the advocates of skeptical theism posit. Otherwise, that will lead to a transcendental epistemological problem similar to that of Kant. The question would be: if there are certain unknowable divine intentions behind the reality of evil, how did the skeptical theists *know* that such *unknowable* divine intentions exist? In fact, to be sure, the very assertion of the skeptical theists that there are unknowable divine intentions for the reality of evil, amounts to *Adignorantiam*. This is because it entirely rules out the possibility of accessing such knowledge in the future.

Conclusion

So far, we have engaged, in this paper, in a critical interrogation of some conceptions of evil. We have also discussed the two traditional atheological arguments from evil, which are: logical and evidential arguments. While the logical argument contends that the attributes of a good creationistic God is inconsistent with the reality of evil in the world, the evidential argument, on the other hand, maintains that every instance and trace of suffering in the world, makes the existence of a morally good God at best, improbable. These two arguments from evil have been discussed

⁴⁶. Michael Tooley, "The problem of evil." *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*. Plato.stanford.edu. 2015.

⁴⁷. Tooley, Michael. "The Argument from Evil." *Philosophical Perspectives*, 5 no 1. (1991):89-134; Bruce Langtry, *God, the Best and Evil* (U.S.A: Oxford University press, 2008), 191.

together with the various objections raised against them. In respect of the two atheological arguments, we attempted a critical assessment of the objections of the advocates of freewill defense argument and the argument of the skeptical theists with specific interrogation of the positions of Alvin Plantinga and Stephen Wykstra. Our argument against the defenders of freewill argument is that they seem to have taken two of the essential attributes of God, Omnipotence and Omniscience, for granted by maintaining the view that God could not have created a world where only moral good exists. We contended that this argument questions the Omnipotence of God and also queries His attribute of Omniscience. Our criticism of the position of the Skeptical Theists that there exist divine reasons for the reality of evil, the knowledge of which transcends the comprehension of human understanding, is that the possession of the knowledge of the existence of such divine reasons by the Skeptical Theists themselves, nullifies their argument about its transcendentality on the one hand, and its incomprehensibility on the other. Besides, we argued that the position of the Skeptical Theists that such divine reasons are unknowable, amounts to *ad ignorantiam* because if such knowledge is unattainable now, there is no certainty that it remains unattainable in the future and forever. Meanwhile, the position of Skeptical Theists entirely forestalls the possibility of having such knowledge altogether.

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