

THE PROBLEM OF EVIL FROM A DECOLONIAL VIEWPOINT

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In this article, we contest the idea that evil does not exist, or that it is a mistaken grasp of reality to contend that evil exists. We analyze two versions of this argument: the 'orchestra argument' and the 'mystical argument.' In common, these arguments contend that those who affirm the existence of evil in the world have a limited view of reality. We argue that these views are either over-abstract from reality or do not offer a plausible approach to the problem of evil. We then advance a decolonial perspective on evil. According to the perspective advanced here, evil is conceptualized as a phenomenon that diminishes life. We contend this view provides a better account of how to understand evil.

Keywords: The problem of evil; African metaphysics and religions; decolonial philosophy of religion; the methodology of philosophy

INTRODUCTION

Philosophers have debated God's nature and His existence, at least since Antiquity (Meister 2007; Taliaferro 2019; Wainwright 2017). The debate is vast and includes arguments about God's existence from cosmological, ontological, and teleological viewpoints (Meister 2007; Oppy 2020; Plantinga 1974; Ratzsch and Koperski 2020; Reichenbach 2021). One argument that challenges God's existence is the problem of evil: how can an almighty, all-knowing, and all-powerful God allow evil to exist? One answer to this question sometimes encountered in the literature is that evil does not exist;¹ rather, the concept of evil lies in a misunderstanding of how the world really is (Pope 2000). This is *not the same* as stating that there is no suffering in the world. Instead, it is a statement about the quality of suffering: that suffering is *not an evil* thing, and understanding it as such is to misunderstand reality. Some, like Alexander Pope, defend this by contending that only goodness exists and that suffering

is actually good. We call this view the 'orchestra argument'. Others, like the mystics, contend that 'evil' is a mundane thing with a limited classification that cannot capture the nature of reality. We call this perspective the 'mystical argument' (Lorkowski 2015).

There is a wide variety of explanations of the problem of evil, and arguments significantly differ from each other. Indeed, the argument we address in this article is widely contested, even in Theistic circles (Van Inwagen 2008). Nonetheless, there has not yet been raised an African critique of the argument that evil is inexistent and that understanding some events as evil is a misconception of reality. In this article, we will fill this gap in the literature and offer an African philosophical criticism of the solution to the problem of evil that upholds this view. This African critique targets an aspect not yet explored: namely, the methodological problems raised by claiming evil is inexistent. We then argue that the concept of evil does *not* inaccurately conceive reality as *some* theodicies would have it. From the African viewpoint, evil is conceptualized as a phenomenon that is real in the universe, just as goodness is. In our argument, evil is defined as a phenomenon that diminishes life, while goodness is a phenomenon that nourishes or strengthens life. Put in another way, evil is something that brings about a dehumanizing type of physical or mental pain. For example, the pain from a needle that injects a vaccine into the body is not dehumanizing because it strengthens life. But the pain from a needle that inflicts torture is dehumanizing because it diminishes life. Given that it is possible to *qualitatively differentiate* evil from good, the problem of evil cannot be resolved by declaring it inexistent.

The argument differs from previous research in at least three important ways. First, it is grounded on African epistemologies and African philosophy of religion. We advance a decolonial approach to a philosophical problem (Chimakonam 2019; Chimakonam and Ogbonnaya 2021). As such, we try to solve a metaphysical and normative problem in an inclusive manner that does not neglect the diversity of epistemologies and promotes a cognitive Imperial agenda (Santos 2018). In short, in contrast with other views, our approach promotes a comprehensive metaphysical viewpoint to the problem of evil. Secondly, we conceptualize evil as a phenomenon that diminishes life or dehumanizes humans. Although this idea has been implicitly held by vitality theorists (Agada 2019; Tempels 2010), we are the first to develop it at length and explicitly with respect to the philosophy of religion. Thirdly, although some scholars (Harrison 2020; Wang and Cordeiro-Rodrigues 2022) have suggested a more global and inclusive methodology for the discipline of philosophy of religion, they have not done so by offering a decolonial methodology as this article does.

To further this task, we have divided this article into five sections. We start in section 1 by clarifying the problem of evil and offering a brief history of the problem. Then, in the second section, we outline the key arguments that contend that evil does not exist and that understanding some things as evil is a misconception of reality. This section offers two possible versions of this argument – the orchestra and the mystical arguments. In the third section, we will consider the African philosophy of religion as a non-ideal theory. In section four, we shall focus on the problem of evil from an African perspective. We will consider the notions of God, goodness, and life in order to articulate a decolonial approach to the problem of evil that refutes the argument that evil does not exist. In section five, we shall consider some possible objections to our position.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

Although later we will offer an African approach to the problem enunciated here, the philosophical question that we are addressing here has been framed by the Western philosophical canon, and we wish to briefly outline its significance, meaning, and history. Philosophers in the Western tradition have generally conceptualized God in a way that creates a philosophical conundrum. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, God, among other features, is the creator of all things, omniscient, omnipotent, and morally perfect. He created the universe, and He has always existed; God is a cross-temporal being (or a person) who precedes all existence and creates all things (Van Inwagen 2008). Moreover, according to the Judeo-Christian tradition, God knows everything (omniscient) (Van Inwagen 2008). Further, He is omnipotent. The meaning of omnipotence is disputed, as some philosophers have understood it as the ability to do anything that He wishes (Taliaferro 2019; Tooley 2019; Wainwright 2017). However, contemporary analytical philosophers have, generally speaking, conceptualized omnipotence as the capacity to do anything that is logically possible (Faria 2020; Plantinga 1974; Swinburne 1998).

Nonetheless, characterizing God in such a way raises a philosophical problem. Atheists have challenged the existence of God (or at least the Theist God) on the grounds that if such a God existed, He would not allow evil to exist. Particularly, if God is all-powerful, He knows everything, and He is morally perfect, then He would have the capacity (from omnipresence), the knowledge (from omniscience), and the will (from moral perfection) to stop evil. Nonetheless, we observe loads of evil in the world. Therefore, some Atheists would uphold that it is not possible that both God and evil exist; as it is obvious that evil exists, the Atheist concludes that God does not exist (Mackie 1955; Rowe 1988; Tooley 2019, 1991).

Broadly speaking, the arguments from evil take two forms: the logical and evidential arguments against the existence of God. The logical problem of evil is that it is not logically consistent to hold beliefs that both God and evil exist. This problem is stated most clearly by the philosopher John Mackie:

I think, however, 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, that the several parts of the essential theological doctrine are inconsistent with one another (Mackie 1955, p. 200).

Other philosophers do not challenge the logical consistency of the problem of evil. They consider that it is very possible that believing in God and evil is logically consistent. Nonetheless, they challenge the existence of God on probabilistic grounds. The argument is that, albeit it may be logically consistent to believe in God, it is unlikely that God exists because there is such an amount of horrendous and arbitrary forms of evil in the world that it is not probable that He exists. More specifically, they contend that a morally perfect, omniscient, and omnipotent God would potentially allow some evil, but not the amount and kinds of evil that exist in the world. Rather a

God with those features would minimize evil, which is not the case in our world. Hence, it is unlikely that God exists (Rowe 1988; Tooley 2019).

Debates on the problem of evil go back to Ancient Greece. Some argue that it was in Plato's *The Republic* the first instance of the problem of evil was captured (Greene 1963). In Book II of *The Republic*, Socrates suggests that evil does not come from the gods:

...since a god is good, he is not – as most people claim – the cause of everything that happens to human beings but of only a few things, for good things are fewer than bad ones in our lives. He alone is responsible for the good things, but we must find some other cause for the bad ones, not a god (Plato and Lane 2007, 379c).

The problem of evil in Plato is not formulated exactly in the same way as we formulate it today (Plato and Lane 2007). However, this seems to be the first time that an akin problem is being addressed. Later in the *Timaeus*, Plato offers a dualistic cosmology of the universe, where he contends that there is not a single cause for everything that exists, and he explains that evil is the result of a second eternal cause (Plato 2000). Yet Plato's preoccupation does not seem to be that evil challenges the existence of God. Instead, he tries to explain the causes of things (Hickson 2013). Epicurus is also said to have paid attention to the problem of evil. Although we do not have evidence that this was the case, the biographer Diogenes Laertius attributes to Epicurus this discussion. Furthermore, Laertius and several other sources attribute to Epicurus the idea that the existence of natural evil challenges the existence of God (Hickson 2013). More evidence, however, can be found in the work of Early Skeptics, like Sextus Empiricus, who explored the problem in the third book of the *Outlines of Scepticism* (Empiricus 2000). In there, he doubts divine providence due to the existence of evil:

[the gods] provided for all things, there would be nothing evil in the universe; but [people] say that everything is full of evil. Therefore the gods will not be said to provide for everything. But if they provide for some things, why do they provide for these and not for those? Either they both want to and can provide for all, or they want to but cannot, or they can but do not want to, or they neither want to nor can. If they both wanted to and could, then they would provide for all; but they do not provide for all, for the reason I have just given; therefore, it is not the case that they both want to and can provide for all. If they want to but cannot, they are weaker than the cause in virtue of which they cannot provide for the things for which they do not provide; but it is contrary to the concept of god that a god should be weaker than anything. If they can provide for all but do not want to, they will be thought to be malign. If they neither want to nor can, they are both malign and weak – and only the impious would say this about the gods.

The gods, therefore, do not provide for the things in the universe. But if they have providence for nothing and have no function and no effect, we will not be able to say how it is apprehended that there are gods, since it is neither apparent in itself nor apprehended by way of any effects. For this reason too, then, it is inapprehensible whether there are gods (Empiricus 2000, 145–146).

In the Middle Ages, the problem of evil was also widely discussed. Most famously, the debates between Manicheans and St. Augustine. The Manicheans believed in God and in an evil substance that opposed the substance of God. This substance rebelled against God, and this is how evil is explained in the world. They did not think that it was plausible to simultaneously believe that all exists because of God's command and do not derive from God the evil things that exist in the world. So, they argue that either everything is from God, including evil, or not everything is from God. Augustine, in contrast, explained that evil resulted from human free will, which was used wrongly by the first man and woman. This, in turn, led to a form of punishment by God manifested in physical evil (Hua 2022). Evil, for Augustine, only exists as a privation of good, i.e., it has no essence (Augustine 2012). This view is reiterated by the Medieval philosopher Boethius in his book *The Consolation of Philosophy* (Boethius 2008). Thomas Aquinas is another famous Medieval philosopher who explored the problem of evil. In part, Aquinas strengthens the view popular in Medieval philosophy that evil is privation instead of essence. He adds that the existence of evil serves a greater good. For example, natural evil makes the world better because it contributes to the goodness of creation. Aquinas (1981) upholds that the world is, in fact, better due to the existence of evil. His view grounds many of the contemporary views on the problem of evil.

Modern philosophers have also discussed the problem of evil. In his *Meditations*, René Descartes poses the following question: if God is good, how come he has caused humans to commit errors so frequently? This appears in the fourth meditation, and Descartes replies that humans misuse the capacity for reason that God gave them (Descartes 1993). This first Modern treatment of the problem then sparked several other philosophers (such as Gottfried Leibniz, Baruch Spinoza, and Nicolas Malebranche) to address it with reference to Descartes's fourth meditation (Hickson 2013). Leibniz's discussion in his *Theodicy* outlines three kinds of evil: metaphysical, physical, and moral evil (Leibniz 2017). Metaphysical evil is understood as imperfection. In one passage of the *Theodicy*, Leibniz states: "one must consider that there is an original imperfection in the creature before sin because the creature is essentially limited" (Leibniz 2017, 20). Thus, metaphysical evil refers to the imperfection or the limitation of essence that can be found in finite beings (Rutherford, 1998). Physical evil occurs in suffering; for example, pain is a form of physical evil. Moral evil occurs when there are sins. For Leibniz, given that God is all-good and all-powerful, He must have chosen this world out of different possible worlds because this is the best of all possible worlds. Voltaire has satirized this philosophical optimism in his book *Candide*. In his book, Voltaire tells the story of Candide, a man who believes this is the best of all possible worlds and goes through multiple hardships in the best of all possible worlds (Voltaire and Ganofsky 2020). The book is written in an ironic

tone to ridicule the Leibnizian viewpoint. Another famous Modern treatment of the question is in David Hume's *Dialogues* (Hume 2008). It is possible to interpret that Hume tried to render the existence of God unlikely, especially through the voice of Philo. Philo does not challenge that God and evil are consistent with each other but contends that it is improbable that both can co-exist, which suggests a version of the evidential problem of evil.

There are several contemporary versions of this discussion. In the Western tradition, philosophers like Richard Swinburne, similarly to Aquinas, contend that the world is a better one because evil exists. Michael Murray justifies evil as part of nomic order (Murray 2008); Alvin Plantinga offers a free-will explanation of the problem of evil (Plantinga 1974); John Hick argues that evil is necessary for soul-making (Hick 1971). In the African tradition, the tradition has been mostly to contend that there is a problem of evil, given the need for evil and goodness to complement each other as part of reality (AE Chimakonam 2022; Ogbonnaya 2022). What this brief history demonstrates is that the arguments about the problem of evil have been significantly different, and we should not generalize them. Hence, in the following section, we will outline only one kind of argument about the problem of evil, i.e., the argument that the concept of evil inaccurately describes reality because there is no such thing in the world as evil.

EVIL AS INEXISTENT

To recall, the focus of this article is the argument that evil does not exist, i.e., the concept of evil does not correspond to anything in the actual world. More precisely, the statement is not that suffering does not exist; rather, it is a denial of the negative qualitative evaluation of such suffering (which classifies the suffering as evil). The statement also ought to be differentiated from the view of some Medieval philosophers that evil is the privation of good. For Medieval philosophers like Augustine, Boethius, and Aquinas, evil was real but without essence. The view being analyzed in this article, instead, contends that the concept of evil lies in a misconception of reality; so, the solution to the problem of evil is to state that evil does not exist. Put differently, according to this argument, the suffering observed in the world only appears as evil, but not in fact.

One version of this view is the orchestra argument. According to the orchestra argument, God has a plan, and by looking at the bigger picture, it will be clear that the supposed evil that occurred is, in fact, a good (Pope 2000). This perspective is often summarized in the Christian saying, 'God writes straight on tortuous lines.' This argument states that, from a narrow point of view, some states of affairs may look like evil; but in a broader view (which is the one that God supposedly has), what looks like evil is not evil but, instead, good. For example, although parents imposing restrictions on a child's freedom may look like a bad thing to the child, such restrictions may teach the child limits and respect for others. The restrictions only *apparently* look like evil, but in a broader picture, they are not.

Similarly, according to this view, God acts like a parent who knows best and inflicts suffering for greater good; if contextualized in God's plan for greater good, evil

cannot be considered evil anymore.² That is, precisely because *this suffering* is part of this greater good, *it cannot be understood as a form of evil*. Moreover, individuals cannot know the mind of God and because individuals do not realize it, it is not possible to affirm whether evil exists or not. According to this view, it is not the burden of proof of those who are skeptical about the existence of evil to prove its existence; rather, the burden of proof of those who wish to show that evil exists to prove that it exists (Meister 2007; Wykstra and Perrine 2012).

To sum up, according to the orchestra argument, evil is analogous to an isolated passage of a piece of music. This passage in isolation may sound ugly or weird, but not if integrated into a symphony. Particularly, a symphony is composed of different elements, i.e., different passages, different instruments, and so forth, which in isolation may sound very ugly; but, if put together, they may perform a very pleasant sound. Analogously to the isolated piece that may sound ugly if played outside the context in which the composer meant to place it, evil *only looks evil* outside its context, but, *if contextualized*, its true nature – good – would appear. Thus, what is understood as evil, will be part of a morally good plan, if put in the right context. Most famously, Alexander Pope (2000, Epistle I, 11. 289ff.) states:

'All nature is but art unknown to thee,
All chance, direction which thou canst not see;
All discord, harmony not understood;
All partial evil, universal good;
And, in spite of pride, in erring reason's spite,
One truth is clear, Whatever is, is right.'

The above passage offers the most common argument that evil is inexistent and that the concept of evil portrays a mistaken understanding of reality. Although it is not a common interpretation of this argument, there is also a mystical version of it. The mystical version states that evil is not real because the term 'evil' is a narrow-minded way to understand reality (Lorkowski 2015). From this viewpoint, when properly looking at the nature of things, we realize that a binary categorization of the world is reductive and lacks the explanatory power of reality (Derrida 1982). For example, good things can generate bad things and vice-versa. The implication of this perspective is that reality is much more complex, and the classifications of events as 'evil' or 'good' are simply inaccurate. According to this view, a broader perspective of ontological reality demonstrates that reality is not binary, and such classifications oversimplify what things are (McGinn 2003). In short, the qualification of something as evil is not a classification that accurately captures what things are because it enters this binary logic which is limiting.

Note that the rationales behind the two ways to argue that the concept of evil misconceives reality are rather different. In the case of the Christian theology of Pope, the underlying reason that explains that evil does not exist is the belief that God is omnipotent and morally perfect. According to this Judeo-Christian conception, a morally perfect God could not act immorally and had the power to correct imperfections. Hence, it is not possible that a being with such characteristics would

allow morally imperfect events in the world He created. Surely, the justifications in Christian theology do not need to take this shape: as explained in the previous section, not all Christians state that evil does not correspond to anything real; many Christian philosophers, like van Inwagen and Plantinga, have justified the existence of evil differently, without denying its existence (Plantinga 1974; Van Inwagen 2008).

The mystical version of the argument is different. Evil inaccurately describes reality not because there is a greater plan, but because of a *binary* classification of reality – such as the one of 'good versus evil' – oversimplifies what things are. Reality can only be felt/experienced rather than rationally understood; feeling reality constitutes, in fact, the genuine understanding of it (Liu 2017). It is only at the level of the inexpressible experience that reality can be grasped, and to the extent that 'evil' and 'good' are forms of verbal expression, they are limited ways to grasp reality. The perception of things ought to be done mystically (McGinn 2003). But the word 'mystical' itself is problematic for at least two orders of reason. Firstly, by using 'mystical,' one is already categorizing a state of affairs with a term that inevitably contrasts with 'rational' and, as explained before, reality goes beyond any categorization. Secondly, the perception of reality, if genuine, is not mystical in the sense that it is not mysterious, but brightly clear and concrete. Thus, the word mystical needs to be handled with care, and it is simply an *approximation* of what mystics consider to not be possible to be expressible in words (Liu 2017).

AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION AS A NON-IDEAL THEORY

Philosophical enterprises in the Global North have been routinely carried out in a detached, idealistic, and abstract manner without looking significantly in detail at real questions of socio-economic, political, and historical oppression. Particularly, much of the philosophical work is carried out assuming an ideal society, but not looking at how these principles apply in real societies (Mills 2005; Olivier 2016). This way of carrying out philosophical enterprises – especially the ones which have a normative dimension – has often led to a neglect of disadvantaged groups. The over-abstract approach to philosophy neglects that general principles may apply differently to groups that face different social realities (Cordeiro-Rodrigues 2022; Crenshaw 1990; Mills 2005). This problem has mostly been identified with regards to ethical enterprises and not to questions of philosophy of religion; nonetheless, the problem of evil, which we are dealing with, albeit not an ethical question per se, surely has a normative dimension, and we wish to demonstrate that the problems of over-abstractation also apply here.

The first criticism of the idea that evil is inexistent is that the argument that some evils can be justified because they promote higher goods may look reasonable until one looks at social reality and identifies who are exactly those who are being burdened with most evils in the world (Jones 1973). Specifically, it is Africans³ worldwide who often suffer the majority of burdens related to poverty, disease, violence, social exclusion, and other evils (Cordeiro-Rodrigues 2022). Taking this on board, the argument about evil being inexistent would have to be that it is reasonable to sacrifice the goods of a historically oppressed group to promote a higher good. Or, to be more

specific, the argument that evil does not exist and that to classify things as 'evil' is a misconception of reality implies that an evil committed to a historically oppressed group is not evil since it promotes a higher good in the long term. Considering this social reality, the argument does not look as attractive as before and, in fact, may be quite unreasonable. Today, it would be unlikely that any philosopher would affirm that sacrificing the welfare of certain ethnicities, especially historically oppressed ones, would be justifiable on the grounds of promoting a higher good (Cordeiro-Rodrigues 2022), and neither would any government be justified to do so. Indeed, the similarity of the argument with some colonial thought is intriguing; for example, slavery was sometimes rationalized and justified because it promoted higher goods.

The idea that evil is only a misconception of reality seems to rely on an epistemological and methodological position of privilege that neglects the facts of the world. This becomes more apparent when we consider the sufferings experienced by some people in some parts of the world. Thus, conceptualizing suffering as a mere misconception of reality is only possible for someone who is either apathetic to suffering and lacks a sense of justice or is unaware of the significant hardships that individuals, especially those who are from disadvantaged ethnic nationalities routinely face. Put differently, in the face of the scenario above, there are two possible interpretations. One is the view that knows about the inequalities we have described but considers them irrelevant. Nonetheless, this position is so counterintuitive and unreasonable that it becomes necessary for the philosopher holding this view to further justify their position. When philosophical conclusions are so counterintuitive, it is then the burden of proof of the person who defends it to support it with strong justification (Huemer 2006). In fact, the philosopher who holds such a view seems to lack some sense of justice.

The other alternative is that the philosopher who believes that evil is inexistent might be writing from such a standpoint of privilege and is unable to see that people suffer. For example, individuals raised in a context of privilege may fail to see how much they have benefited from their ethnic, class, and gender identity and that these have made their lives easier. Consequently, they sometimes assume those privileges are the norm and, thereby, neglect the hardships other individuals have to go through (McIntosh 2017). However, in this case, there is a serious methodological flaw, and it seems rather inadequate to address suffering from such a viewpoint. This is because this type of approach consists of a one-sided consideration of a problem or the use of a methodology that marginalizes some groups by drawing a line between the insider and the outsider, the norm and the normalized.

An immediate response from the defender of the inexistence of evil could be that we have misunderstood her argument and that her statement was not one about the African subject, but an epistemological and metaphysical statement about reality. In reply, note that our point is that this epistemological and metaphysical view is the result of a biased and privileged social positioning that implies a methodological problem. Hence, a more inclusive epistemology and metaphysics are necessary. In other words, the viewpoint reflects privilege, and even if the one offering such a view does not intend to refer to the African subject, the African subject is the absent referent, i.e., the individual who, albeit absent in the discourse, is present in the implications of the discourse (Morrison 1992). Indeed, the act of dismissing African suffering as

suffering constitutes a form of othering to the extent that misrecognizes the African subject as one who is capable of experiencing anything, and dismissing what they are feeling as unimportant. Some racist justifications of medical experiments on Africans were precisely rationalized on the grounds that Africans did not feel pain (Olivier and Cordeiro-Rodrigues 2017).

On top of this, the epistemological and metaphysical viewpoint underlying it hinges on statements that are not falsifiable and, as such, of dubious philosophical value. Both versions of the argument above rely on the idea that there is a *possible world* where their theories may be possible, and therefore, they are not logically incoherent; that is, they argue that it is possible that either God has a greater plan or that reality is quite complex and that the words we use are limited and one can only perceive true reality by experiencing. This is indeed possible, but there is no reason to believe in this more than believing in the suffering of individuals. Our beliefs should rely on the best available evidence and justification with better explanatory power, and the theories above are only based on speculation, while evil relies on more straightforward evidence and various testimonials.

There are stronger reasons to believe that suffering exists rather than it is a form of good. Concerning the orchestra version of the argument, there is no reason to privilege the idea that there is a beautiful orchestra played by God, which we fail to see over the idea that what many people experience as suffering is not suffering. There is also no reason (only speculation) to believe that we misunderstand suffering because we do not understand or can perceive the mind of God. Even if this were the case, as we have no evidence, it is more reasonable to follow a principle of caution, i.e., that we should not assume a metaphysical and epistemological viewpoint that misrecognizes or is likely to misrecognize the suffering of certain ethnicities. The burden of proof is on those who neglect what is more intuitive, not on the side of those who rely on evidence.

In the case of the argument grounded on mysticism, more specifically, there is no reason to believe that our perception of social reality is so far off that we cannot perceive our suffering or that others' suffering is unreal. Scientific evidence has pointed in the opposite direction: individuals are capable, to a certain level, of perceiving and recognizing other beings suffering without experiencing it (Carmody 2020; Rutledge 2020). Indeed, privileging a purely speculative view over this testimonial evidence seems to constitute a form of testimonial injustice, i.e., a neglect or dismissal of the individual's statement based on her identity (Fricker 2009). Particularly, it is the case to the extent that African suffering, which is much more intuitive to believe, is dismissed vis-à-vis a theory forwarded by some non-African philosophers.

AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION: A DECOLONIAL APPROACH TO THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

In discussing the problem of evil, as already shown in a previous section, Western approaches tend to neglect epistemologies from the Global South and focus only on privileged epistemologies of the North, which grounds the issue on real-world situations.

Having identified the methodological and normative problems associated with conceiving evil as inexistent, in this section, we wish to offer a theory grounded on a decolonial view that does not have the same methodological and normative issues. By decolonial, we mean a strategy that does not privilege one epistemology or realm of existence and residualize another. It is multi-dimensional in approach and aims to dismantle coloniality as a vision of the world. A colonial strategy is one that imposes one standard and discriminates against others, thereby presenting a marginal view of reality. This is a tendency that can be found in the approach of much of Western scholarship and methods.

To offer an account that encompasses the epistemologies of the South allows us to be more inclusive because it includes the suffering of those who are worst off. In a similar line to John Rawls's original position, which forces individuals to look at the welfare of the worst off, an account of the problem of evil that takes into consideration the suffering of those who are most disadvantaged allows us to have a broader perspective on what suffering is (Wang and Cordeiro-Rodrigues 2022).

This decolonial theory does not view evil as inexistent or bid to explain it away as theodicies do. It acknowledges that evil is real and manifests in the form of pain, suffering, hardship, and life's problems. The decolonial theory we wish to propose here is not insensitive, and over-abstract as the misconception of reality theory is. It considers, for example, the daily experiences of suffering in Africa as manifestations of evil. Some of these experiences can be construed to have spiritual sources, while others can be construed to have mundane sources, but they are real. Africans do not expect a world of goodness alone because it is understood that both good and evil are necessary components of human existence, but the daily striving is to have more goodness and less evil. The African decolonial cultural worldview sees evil as a crucial component of existence even though the daily striving of Africans is to have more goodness and less evil in their lives. As Ogbu Kalu explains (1978, 42), when Africans engage in acts of worship to their gods, they do so with the singular purpose of attracting more goodness and rebuffing evil. Deities that fail to deliver on this are quickly abandoned. Africans do not expect a world of goodness alone because it is understood that both good and evil are necessary components of human existence, but the daily striving is to have more goodness and less evil. Thus, the African philosophical enterprise, as part of the epistemologies of the oppressed (Oelofsen 2015; Tabensky 2008), offers a nuanced approach to the problem of evil to the extent that it assumes a more *practical standpoint* in studying problems such as evil.

We faulted the claim that evil is inexistent in a previous section using the African experience and contended that the barrage of sufferings by many people in Africa qualifies as evil, and they are not unreal, nor do they lead to a greater good. Thus, if evil from the African perspective is not unreal as some theodicies claim, and it cannot be sufficiently explained with the logical and evidential arguments, how else can it be conceived? We uphold that it should be precisely grounded on this experience that we should try to build up a metaphysical theory. Particularly, the strategy we will use is to follow the path of decoloniality. The decolonial path entails a move away from the conventional arguments in the West, the theodicies, and the Judeo-Christian religious experience that have come down through colonial education, religious mission, and administration. It also entails focusing on the African worldview perception of evil and

the practical everyday interpretation of evil experiences. The decolonial approach to the problem of evil thus jettisons all manner of influences from the West and considers the issue from both the mundane and spiritual angles in the metaphysics of the various African cultures. This metaphysics indicates that evil has both mundane and spiritual sources and solutions. It is inevitable in a world filled with forces of good and evil. While the religious experience helps Africans exert control on the spiritual sources of evil, observance of duty, whether to the community norms or to fellow humans, it can also help control mundane sources of evil. Thus, the daily life of Africans is one in which there is a striving to avoid evil and increase goodness.

The religious stance of the African approach can further be explained using the belief in ancestors. The idea of ancestors found in many African worldviews is not exclusively about celebrating dead members of the lineage who led praiseworthy lives; it is most importantly about setting up a spiritual defense mechanism for the living members of the clan. To shed more light on this, Africans think of evil as a phenomenon with two main sources. The first is bad spirits and some gods, and the second is bad people representing the two spheres of existence: the spiritual and the physical. Evil itself can be thought of in decolonial terms as a phenomenon that diminishes life, where life is the ultimate value around which other values revolve. The realm of ancestors thus becomes a buffer between the roaming bad spirits and the living. Ancestors receive regular sacrifices and libations from the living members of their clan, who remind them of their duty to protect their living offspring from the machinations of bad spirits (Ilogu 1973; Meko 2020; Morgan and Okyere-Manu 2020). The position of the ancestors is so important in the life of a typical African community since humans are limited in their abilities to enter the spirit world or battle bad spirits. Ancestors then become the main resort to combat the menace of the bad spirits and ensure the protection of the living.

To understand the notion of evil and whether it constitutes a philosophical problem from an African perspective, it is important to understand the ideas of God, goodness, and life from a decolonial standpoint. Kwasi Wiredu (2002) cautions that "conceptual decolonization" is strategic to unfolding the authentic African epistemic perspective. The idea is that approaching reality from non-African epistemic categories often leads to misrepresentation, misinterpretation, and even outright distortion of the African episteme (Chimakonam and Ogbonnaya 2021). To avoid these, Wiredu recommends that we decolonize our philosophical concepts. This strategy consists in unpacking our concepts through the African cultural lens. For example, instead of looking at the concepts of evil, God, goodness, and life from the Judeo-Christian, Asian or Western philosophical canons, we can approach them from an African cultural perspective by asking decolonial questions. Rather than consider the theories on the problem of evil in other philosophical traditions, we can go to the basics and ask, what do evil and goodness mean for the Africans? An attempt to answer this question will lead to yet another question, how do Africans conceive God? This will, in turn, lead to the question of the significance of life in the African world. This approach is decolonial because it sets aside the hegemonic canons of the colonial order and seeks to articulate epistemic formations that truly represent the African worldviews and are grounded in the African experience of the world.

To begin with, the idea of one God in African Traditional Religions (ATR) is not yet settled. Various African scholars disagree as to whether the idea of a supreme God who towers above lesser deities is a feature of the African Traditional Religions before the encounter with the Abrahamic religions. While some argue that the idea of the supreme God was part of the belief system of ATRs long before the colonial missions (see Mbiti 1969; Ezeugwu and Chinweuba 2018), others insist that it was a product of the influence of the Christian missions (see Nze 1981; Nwoga 1984). Donatus Nwoga (1984, 36-37), writing about the Igbo culture specifically, argues that the "supreme God is a stranger in Igbo religious thought." However, Evaristus Ezeugwu and Gregory Chinweuba (2018, 34-36), in a recent essay, appealed to various sources, including oral archives, to argue "that the idea of creation and Supreme creator existed in Igbo thought and this Supreme Being pre-dates the existence of man and other realities." This disagreement is by no means concluded, but we can lean on the fact that cultures grow by mutual influence to grant for the sake of this essay that the idea of a supreme God was a feature of some, even if not all of the ATRs. The question then is, what is the nature and status of God in ATRs?

For some, call them members of the 'similarity school', the Supreme God of ATRs is pretty much the same God of the Judeo-Christian religion. God is God, and the same for all peoples. He is all-powerful, all-knowing, and morally perfect. Scholars like JB Danquah (1944), Bolaji Idowu (1968), John Mbiti (1969), and Ebunolowa Oduwole (2007) belong to this category. This school does not represent a decolonial approach to the study of the problem of evil. The difference, for most of those who hold this similarity view, can only be found in the modes of worship. There is also a lot of influence from the colonial intellectual cultures.

Nonetheless, there is another school, call them the 'autochthon school', the supreme God of the ATRs might be very powerful, but not all-powerful, very knowledgeable but not all-knowing, and very good but not morally perfect. This school *represents* a decolonial approach to the African philosophy of religion. They argue that He would not need the lesser deities who dot the landscape of ATRs if He were all those. John Bewaji (1998), Ademola Fayemi (2012), and very recently, JO Chimakonam and AE Chimakonam (2022) are some of those one could place in this school. Holders of this latter view do not doubt that the idea of the Supreme God has been part of the ATRs from a distant past. What they debate is that He shares similar features as the God of the Judeo-Christian religion. Bewaji (1998), for one, criticizes those who hold the former view as dressing the African God in the robe of the Christian God.

Members of the similarity school "introduced the fourth dimension of intellectual smuggling of their Christian beliefs into the religious terrain of Africa; they Hellenized and clothed the African God in borrowed garbs, as if He had always been nude!" (Bewaji 1998, 4). For him, the African God is neither morally perfect nor omnipotent. As he puts it, "There is no doubt that God is the most powerful Being and that He has all the superlative attributes one can consider, but the Yoruba do not think that such a being cannot do evil or cause evil. It is part of the attributes of the Supreme Being to be able to utilize all things" (Bewaji 1998, 11).

Furthermore, not all events in the world are under his control. Even though some Western scholars like Swinburne (Swinburne 1998), would say that God has power

and good reasons to allow evil because of the benefits it brings, the logical and evidential arguments present Him as morally perfect. Although what we wish to explain here is that God in the ATRs is imperfect and not so much that God can produce evil, but allowing evil or punishing as the Judeo-Christian God does, does not rob Him of his moral perfection because evil is not in his nature, He merely allows it for some good end. The theodicies explain it all away, but in ATRs, being capable of evil is sufficient for moral imperfection. When Bewaji says above that God in ATRs can do all things, he means the ability to do both good and evil as traits in His nature. This implies that God in ATRs is a Harmony-God⁴, rather than a morally perfect God. According to Jonathan Chimakonam and Amara Chimakonam, a Harmony-God does not discriminate between good and evil. It is capable of rewarding and punishing, blessing and cursing as traits in his nature. He does evil not because of some good end but because it pleases Him to do so. In Him, there is a harmony of good and evil. His worshippers aim to always be in His good book. When they fall out with Him, they make sacrifices to appease Him. The target of their worship is to cause Him to bless and reward. When they employ the services of the lesser deities, it is for advocacy to obtain benefits and protection from His wrath. As they put it:

A harmony-God is one who has the capacity for the opposing values of good and evil, and represents a being in whom both polar values complement each other. To those who worship Him, He rewards good deeds with good, and punishes bad ones with evil. He 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 (Chimakonam and Chimakonam 2022, 9).

In addition to the above, we go further to argue that there is evil in the world that occurs outside God's command and will. He cannot control all events, and sometimes humans and non-humans commit some evils that he is unable to stop. Thus, God will possibly allow the evil that he does not know is evil.

From the preceding, we can delve into the moral qualities of evil and goodness. As stated earlier, evil from the ATRs' point of view can be construed as a phenomenon that diminishes life, while goodness is a phenomenon that nourishes or strengthens life. This means that evil is something that brings about a dehumanizing type of pain to people, whether physical or mental. Earlier, we used the analogy of pain from needles to explain these two. A needle produces pain when it pricks the skin, but how do we determine when specific pain is evil and when it is good? This leads us to the notion of life. In ATRs, 'life' is a central value, most especially human life. So, often, traditional Africans use it as a criterion to measure goodness and evil. Whatever diminishes life is taken to be evil, while whatever strengthens life is taken to be good. Life is the ultimate value. Here, when a needle produces pain to inject a life-saving vaccine, it is a good pain, but when it inflicts pain for torture, it is evil because it diminishes life. Elochukwu Uzukwu (1982), writing about the Igbo-Africans, says that "[I]n speech and action, whether in a ritual or a profane context, LIFE stands out for the Igbo as a value around which other values find their meanings. *Ndubuisi* (life is

first), and *Ndukaku* (life is greater than wealth) are proper names pregnant with meanings. *Ndu* is a noun meaning life, existence, and being. The verb *di* or *du* means to be, to exist, (to be alive). Though not within the Bantu linguistic group, the term *ndu* seems to be related to the Bantu *ntu* (being)". The preceding assertions about the supremacy of life in the African worldview are variously corroborated by Chukwulozie Anyanwu (1984), Batholomew Abanuka (1990), and Chimakonam and Ogbonnaya (2015). Thus, it can be argued that an action's effect on life determines the moral quality of such an action.

From the above conception of God in ATRs as Harmony-God, the theory that evil does not exist and is a misconception of reality as captured in some Western literature falls away. The fact laid bare in the above on the reality of evil in the living experiences of Africans, and the moral imperfection of the African Harmony-God demonstrates that evil is not unreal from the African account we are defending here. Evil is a phenomenon that exists. It is something produced by the actions of humans, bad spirits/some gods, and aimed at diminishing life. Its contrast is goodness, which is a phenomenon produced through the actions of humans and good spirits, and aimed at strengthening or enriching life. This highlights the metaphysics that describes the African existence, the interaction of beings and forces with both the mundane and spiritual dimensions. From this metaphysics, our decolonial theory of evil as a real phenomenon that is pivotal to the daily experiences of Africans emerges.

From the foregoing, we can see that our conception and explanation of evil in the above do not fall into the same problem as the theodicies that explain it away as a mere misconception of reality. Our discussion clearly shows that evil is something that has unfavorable consequences on those who experience it. This aligns well with our discussion of the condition of suffering prevalent in many places in Africa. Extreme poverty, diseases, lack of basic amenities, insecurity, conflicts, wars, etc., as some of the things that mount untold suffering to Africans, represent phenomena that diminish life. As a result, it is plausible to construe those as examples of evils in keeping with our African conception in the above.

This theory has clear advantages over evil as inexistent and a misconception of reality theses. Firstly, it is closer to daily experiences and the common-sense epistemological view that there is evil in the world. To state that evil does not exist is a far-fetched understanding of how individuals experience things. Our approach grounds its views on people's experiences, construing therefore an epistemology and *metaphysics from below*. Albert Camus famously stated that metaphysical theories might be embedded in theories of domination that subjugate individuals (Camus 1992; Camus 2015). He, therefore, recommends individuals to become metaphysical rebels. The decolonial theory presented here does precisely this: it rebels against a metaphysics that renders their suffering unreal and offers an alternative that allows the oppressed to have their suffering validated and recognized.

Secondly, the theory that evil is a misconception of reality fails to explain the discrepancy in sufferings in the world, and it leaves unanswered why God would lead some people from some ethnic backgrounds to experience more vividly the misconception of reality that they are suffering. This unfolds in at least two theological problems: (a) why did God choose these groups according to race, gender, and class? (b) why did He make it more difficult for some to perceive his plan than others by

making some experiences lead to some misconceptions of reality? Other theories not addressed here understand that evil is necessary for a greater good (like free will), and that evil is not excessive. In contrast, our theory assumes the existence of evil, and recognizes the discrepancies in suffering, and considers evil excessive. God is not perfect and not omnipotent so he inflicts evil, and he also cannot stop all evil. The recognition of these limitations does not entail the odd view that God had some bizarre plausible moral justification for targeting some groups with suffering or actual suffering. This is because this suffering results from actually morally bad decisions and actions. Our theory, therefore, has a stronger explanatory power than the alternatives. Furthermore, our approach lies in an inclusive methodology that considers the worst off in its evaluation of suffering. This inclusion is precisely what allows us to affirm that evil is real; if our theory was only focused on the privileged, this would not be possible.

Thirdly, a theory that denies the existence of evil can hardly offer a practical approach to normative issues in life. If all is good and there is no evil, how do we decide on what things are meaningful in life, what behavior is ethical, and so forth? It is clearly the case that it is necessary to have a well-defined and clear conception of evil and good to answer these questions, which the arguments that evil is unreal do not hold. Contrastingly, our view offers a groundwork to think about meaningful things and moral behavior. Although we have not explored it here, our theory suggests that the things that are ethical and meaningful to pursue are the ones that promote life (or vitality); on the other hand, things that weaken life are neither meaningful nor ethical. In short, our theory, contrasting with the one criticized in this article, offers an approach that can be applied to other areas of life.

CHALLENGING THE AFRICAN VIEW

At least three possible objections can be raised against our position in this essay. The first is about our interpretation of God in ATRs following Chimakonam and Chimakonam (2022) as Harmony-God who is capable of both good and evil. A critic might challenge this view on the ground that it fails to fulfill the basic criterion for God, i.e., the attributes of omnipotence and moral perfection or omnibenevolence. They may ask, what makes an entity God if He is not morally perfect and all-powerful? There are two ways to respond to this criticism. Our first response would be that there is no universal attribute for God. Omnibenevolence just happens to be one of the attributes of the Judeo-Christian God, and there is no basis to universalize this attribute across cultures. In studying the traditional African religious experience, Bewaji (1998) explains that being capable of both good and evil fulfills an important criterion of what it means to be God in the African religious worldview. God is a powerful being, and humans attempt to appease to reap benefits from His powers so that he would not visit His wrath on them. Worship, for Africans, is not an exercise geared merely at glorifying God; rather, it is aimed at manipulating God to do human bidding. Religious rituals are about the promotion of human interests (Kalu 1978; Ikenga-Metuh 1981; Onunwa 2011). A second approach would be to think of God as a powerful entity that we can conceive with certain attributes, but which is not physical like us. In this way,

the African Harmony-God qualifies as God insofar as He is not bodily extended like us.

Critics may also object to our conception of evil as a phenomenon that causes pain. They may ask whether that implies that any painful experience or pain-causing entity is evil. However, this would be a poor reading of our work. We argue that for any form of pain to qualify as evil, it must be the type that diminishes life, which is believed to be the core value in African religious philosophy. Our examples of a needle that injects a life-saving vaccine and the one used in a torture chamber clearly explain our position.

Finally, critics may object to our conception of life as the basic criterion for determining what qualifies as evil. They may interpret the views of *Uzukwu*, which we cited earlier, as referring to human life, but this is not exclusively so. They may also ask whether the focus on human life does not amount to anthropocentrism, thereby marginalizing other forms of life found in lower-class animals and the environment. This would be an important observation; however, when *Uzukwu* talks about life, he means the generic life and not life in its specific concrete manifestation. Anyanwu (1984, 90) explains this more succinctly:

Though *ndubuisi* (life is first) refers to the life of a human person, we should not lose sight of the importance of life as a generic term. And I think that *Uzukwu* is referring to life as a generic term...I will argue that LIFE, as a generic term, is the ultimate reality; that human life is a participation in the universal life...

Thus, our conception of life beats the charge of anthropocentrism. However, we admit that the idea of gradation of life is still outstanding, in the sense that Kalu (1978), Ikenna-Metuh (1981), and Onunwa (2011), three scholars we cited disclose the African traditional religious experience to be mainly about the interest of humans. For these scholars, human life would have to be placed higher than other forms of life in the African religious experience. However, the point here is that this position does not ultimately discount other forms of life.

CONCLUSION

In this article, we have addressed the argument that evil does not exist. We challenged this view by contending that it suggests a certain lack of unawareness of how the world is. We then put forward a decolonial approach to the problem of evil, which does not understand evil as illusory but instead grounds it on people's experiences. This metaphysics has a stronger explanatory power for evil in the world than the alternative that understands evil as inexistent. It is also more morally attractive because it does not entail bizarre moral theories about why God decided to make certain groups suffer more than others.

NOTES

1. In this article, we use the following statements interchangeably: 'evil is inexistent,' 'evil is unreal,' and 'evil does not exist.'

2. Note that there are philosophers, like Richard Swinburne, who also use the father figure in this way, but do not contend that evil is not to be perceived as such. Swinburne only states that some evils are necessary for some goods to be achieved.

3. By the term 'African' here, we mean individuals of African descent, including those living in Africa and the diaspora. This classification does not entail that Africans are one ethnicity only, as Africa is multi-ethnic. However, the term encompasses a social category of individuals who are often excluded.

4. This concept was first used by JO Chimakonam and AE Chimakonam in their essay "Examining the logical argument of the problem of evil from an African perspective," *Religious Studies*, (2022).

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