Redefining the Problem of Evil in the Context of a Predeterministic World: New Conversations with the Traditional African Worldview

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Abstract
Merciful, holy, all-powerful, all-knowing, spirit, unchanging, the first cause, *unknowable*. These are just some of the properties that some scholars of African religions have attributed to the being they call God. Setting aside accusations that some of these properties reflect the colonially imposed religions, it is almost taken as a given that these properties really do belong to some of the various versions of the African God. This, then, raises the question: how is it ever the case that the present world, filled with various forms of evil and terror, emanates from a God possessing these same properties? Thus, the African God joins the formidable list of deities for which the problem of evil is relevant. In this essay, I argue that the power of the problem of evil lies in the belief, in many major African traditional religions, that God is a personalized entity. This, in turn, ensures a blind misattribution of the properties (mentioned above) to God. To buttress this point, I begin by presenting a materialistic and de-personalised notion of God that sheds away those properties that are imperceptible and/or are not logically necessary. Next, drawing from this new vision of God, and from religious traditions such as the Luba and Bantu traditions, I provide an account of some properties that can be ascribed to God (such as: genderless, eternal, first cause, material and unconscious), and show how this notion of God enables a predeterministic world. Finally, I show that what we refer to as evil is compatible with the idea of a material, depersonalized and unconscious God, and with the context of a predeterministic world that is indifferent to human experience.
Keywords: Africa, Evil, God, Materialistic, Religion

Introduction

> *If God is omnipotent, omniscient, creator (causa sui or prima causa) All-loving, all-good, all-merciful, then how can we explain evil? Does God cause evil? If God does not cause evil, then who causes it? Who created this cause of evil? Was the creator of evil all-knowing, past, present, and future? Or, is God actually all-good, all-loving and all-powerful but unable to stop evil-- which is*

> *patently absurd? Or, does God not wish to stop evil*. (BEWAJI 1998, 6)

Above lies an ancient problem, as old as the first human encounter with tragedy and catastrophe. Just like the ancient Greek philosopher, Epicurus, humans all over the world have asked this question, and have also struggled really hard to grapple with it. Ancient traditional African philosophers (ATAPs) have also grappled with this problem, and it is their ideas that I grapple with here.

For most ATAPs, the dominant view is that God is Merciful, holy, all-powerful, all-knowing, spirit, unchanging, the first cause, unknowable, amongst other things. If their views reflected reality, then one would easily conclude that the problem of evil deeply undermines those views. While some soldiered on in order to hold on to those views by placing the blame on the feet of man, they only succeeded in accentuating the seeming contradictions they sought to uphold. Others took a more attractive route, weakening the more absolute attributes of God, and, thus, creating room for evil in the world. Here, I take their views/method even further by deconstructing the notion of God, with perception and logical necessity as my preferred wrecking ball. I then build and reconstruct a novel notion of God that considers God to be an unconscious, material and depersonalized first cause. In this view, evil, whether understood in the sense of a conscious apprehension of a harm (and therefore a category of the mind), or in the sense of an existing abstract thing (the more popular view), is not the responsibility of God since God is not a personalized and conscious entity. In this way, the view accommodates the comprehension of evil in the world and the existence of God.

To succinctly present this view, I begin by analyzing the notion of God and the problem of evil in traditional African thought, critically examining some important attributes of God, especially as they relate to the problem of evil. By deconstructing this view, I lead us to the notion of a material and unconscious first cause. Within this new context, the problem of evil fails to manifest as some of its basic premises no longer apply.

This article is divided into three major sections. The first section of the work deals with the traditional African idea of God and is divided into subsections that critically examine the relevant attributes of creator, omnipotent and holy/benevolent/all-good. The next section explores less dominant views in African philosophy of religion that weaken the absolute attributes of God found in the dominant view. The third section features my reconstruction of the idea of God as a material and depersonalized entity.

The Traditional African idea of God and the Problem of Evil

The problem of evil, as we know it today, is only as powerful as the notion of God for which it responds to. How may we understand God, or, should I say, how do a significant number of Africans understand God? The answer to this question is hard, incredible as that may seem, but the reason for this difficulty lies in the deliberate colonially motivated epistemicide, which sought to

extinguish traditional African thought, eventually placing a dark cloud of doubt on whatever emerges as an expression of the precolonial notion of x. It is this same dark cloud that hangs over African philosophy of religion, such that claims about the nature of God, by a scholar like John Mbiti (and, perhaps, even other African philosophers), is suspected as decidedly more Christian than it is African. To further bind the attempt to garner more "authentically African" notions of God from traditional societies, hands-on methods like philosophical sagacity, would not prove as useful, due to the undue influence of the major world religions that are present in Africa.
However, one must move forward with what one has – Mbiti's Christianity may have inadvertently or advertently influenced his written work, but we must move on with the type of resources produced by scholars like him and try to draw out the consistencies and inconsistencies that may be present in their work. I insert this sort of benign disclaimer here for the benefit of those who may be pedantic about the use of such resources and for the benefit of those who may be unaware of the situation.

Who is God or what is *It*? The question has been the concern of almost every human being, who has ever taken the time to contemplate his/her place in the world and the magnificence of that world in which s/he finds himself/herself. As human beings, there is a lot we can do, and our ability to manipulate nature is uncanny, but in all our creations and manipulations of raw resources, nothing compares to the sheer beauty and complex expressions of reality that we see – our manipulations included. Surely the architect of such complex magnificence would be a being that is both beyond the world and powerful enough to create it (ATTOE 2022).

However, one important question that this sort of thinking dreads to answer, is the question of why one should believe that this world requires an explanation – such that normally leads to a God. This is the question of the principle of sufficient reason (PSR). For most traditional African thinkers, or more appropriately "anonymous traditional African philosophers" (ATAPs), there are a few reasons why such a question is often ignored. First, there is a non-debatable belief in the existence of God. Mbiti summarises this point as follows:

> All African peoples believe in God. They take this belief for granted. It is at the centre of African Religion and dominates all its other beliefs. But exactly how this belief in God originated, we do not know. We only know that it is a very ancient belief in African religious life. (MBITI 1975, 40)

Similarly, Mutombo Nkulu-N'Sengha is quick to point out that "…Africans have firmly regarded the existence of God as a self-evident truth" (NKULU-N'SENGHA 2009, 286). Like Mbiti, one wonders how this strong belief gained the type of rootedness that allowed the ATAPs to dismiss the question of God's existence (and by extension, the question of PSR) with a wave of the hand. Perhaps it is really the wonderment about nature's awesomeness that

dispelled any forms of disbelief about the existence of God, and if one was looking for a sufficient reason for the existence of things in the world, it would be the very nature of those things (the magnificence of those things) that pointed the ATAPs in the direction of God as the necessary creator of the world. As Nkulu-N'sengha notes:

> Contemplating the majesty of mountains such as Kilimanjaro and Nyiragongo and mighty rivers (Nile, Congo, and Niger), the beauty of the blue sky and the majesty of the stars, and experiencing the power of various spirits and interacting with the Dead through dreams, visions, or mediumship, Africans have firmly regarded the existence of God as a self-evident truth. (NKULU-N'SENGHA 2009, 286)

It cannot be, then, that it is the mere somethingness rather than the nothingness that evokes the need for an explanation of things in the world that leads to God. This is because, as I have said, the ATAPs of religion and metaphysics had already surmised that absolute nothingness is impossible. What allows us to require an explanation for things in the world is mainly the normative value of the relationality that exists among things such that what is understood as the universe, and the various beautiful and terrifying manifestations of that relationality (like mountains, lightning and even the human being), continues to retain its holistic complementary structure. It is the observance of this relationality that allows us to see what is often referred to as causal relationships, or what I have called interactive relationships elsewhere (ATTOE 2022). Thus pricking our curiosity whenever we encounter a thing, and demanding from our intellect, the desire to come to grips with the relational history that had brought that particular thing to bear in the world. In this way, it was the encountered relationality that allowed the ATAPs to wonder about the normative value of this complementary relationship among things in the world, and the marvellous expressions of that relationality, which eventually led them to God (since normativity and purpose required a being for which that normativity and purpose would make sense to[1]).

And so, the ATAPs, on the basis of the above, provided some ideas about the nature of God, which I shall bring to our attention in the next few subsections. At this point, it would be important to bring to your attention that for some ATAPs, God's nature is unknowable. According to Nkulu-N'Sengha:

[1] There is an interesting relationship between normativity and metaphysics in African metaphysical thought. We even see this in the way that relationality trickles down to African ethics with ideas such ubuntu and complementarity (with the metaphysical angle of these theories, seemingly grounding the ethics of that same theory). The difficulty has always been explaining why this is so, since an explanation of what is (metaphysics) ought to be different from an explanation of what ought to be (ethics). Perhaps it is in the idea of God and purpose that we may find this elusive link. But this is just my intuition about the matter.

> God is even called "the unknown" (by the Massai People), "the God of the Unknown" (by the Lunda people), "the Unexplainable" (by the Ngombe people), and "the Marvel of the Marvels" (by the Bakongo people). Numerous proverbs also point to the mysterious nature of God. (NKULU-N'SENGHA 2009, 286)

It is because of this unknowableness that the presence of artistic expressions of the supreme being, beyond Its own creations, is absent. That is, in as many African traditional religions that I am aware of, there are no depictions of the supreme being in idols or paintings or other such representations. The reason for this is the shroud of mystery that surrounds God's nature. This unknowableness has even morphed into the belief that perhaps God is so far away from human experience, that It is no longer unknowable but also non-responsive to human or worldly affairs. I shall deal with this particular view later on in this article.

So, how then is it the case that anyone would attempt to provide an explanation of the traditional African idea of God when, in the views of some ATAPs, God is unknowable? Well, the answer is simple. It is not that ATAPs claim absolute knowledge of the nature of God – indeed one can strongly argue that no one possesses such knowledge – it is that they claim that certain clues about certain aspects of God are decipherable and logically deducible from the existence of things in the world, as well as the relationality that binds it. Thus, it is possible for one to glean tidbits from available clues, which are at the very least, logically valid. Also important to note is the fact that what I present is not an exhaustive analysis of all the known attributes of God from an African perspective. I hone in on those attributes that are most relevant to the problem of evil.

Creator

The most obvious idea about the nature of God is the idea of God as a creator. If it is the very existence of things that demand an explanation that leads to God, then it is clear that God would be both independent of those things in the world, and also the reason why they exist. In other words, God would be the *creator* of things in the world. There are two ways in which most ATAPs imagine that God created the world. In the first instance, it is imagined that God created the world from certain raw materials, in much the same way that an artisan creates certain items from certain other raw materials (WIREDU 1998). This mode of creation nods at the idea that nothingness is inconceivable, and so creation out of absolutely nothing is a mistaken view.

In the second instance, ATAPs think about things in the world as emanating from God, or better still, an emergent property that necessarily proceeds from God. In this way, God is seen as the source of all things. Recall that John Mbiti (1970) commented that in some African religions, God is thought of as creating the raw materials, from which other things in the world

are made, out of nothing. Mbiti's characterization, here, is mistaken, at least logically speaking, since God already existed and must have existed within the confines of space or some other medium of being that we do not know about. In this way, following Akan anonymous traditional philosophers (ATPs), creating out of nothing would be impossible since God already existed and the primary "raw material", from which other raw materials were created, was God's will. By (at least) willing things into being, we see the eventual emergence of the universe as emanating from a part of God – at least God's will. If one were to imagine certain other special gesticulations as part of that willing process (like you might find in a magic act), then one can also conclude that things in the world generally emerge from that willing, and the sophisticated gestures of the relevant parts of the supreme being.

Whatever view one imagines to be the most plausible account of creation from an African religious or philosophical perspective, what remains true is that for most traditional Africans, God is responsible for the creation and sustenance of the world. Like the artisan, God is responsible for how the raw material, from which things in the world are made, are manipulated to create the present world. If one takes to the second view, then whatever present world exists today emanated from, at least, God's will.

Omnipotent

God's omnipotence, as far as the created world is concerned, first expresses itself in the idea that for some ATAPs, God is not only capable of creating things in the world, but also uncreating those same created things. Indeed, as Nkulu-N'sengha notes, God is "the Father Creator Who creates and uncreates" (NKULU-N'SENGHA 2009, 289). Thus, from the onset, we get the idea that no thing in the world, or (more aptly), no created thing in the world is beyond the destructive power of God. The possibility of *uncreation* can be reduced to a few possibilities – the reduction of a created thing to its raw material(s), the reduction of a created thing to nothing, or the transformation of a created thing back to the Godly essence.

From the power to reduce created things to their raw material or to non-existence or to the Godly essence, God's omnipotence flows through logically in other less powerful ways viz. in Its control of nature. For if it were the case that God could create and uncreate, it follows that God's due control over simple or complex situations, and/or beings, is also a reality since such beings, and the situations that emerge from the relationship among various beings, can be created or uncreated by God. It is this logic that grounds the idea by various ATAPs that it is possible for God to control the various forces of nature. It is also this logic that places God at the top of the hierarchy of being (MENKITI 2004), and allows individuals to pray for justice or a change in their fortunes – especially when lesser gods are of no help (given their limitations):

> A few examples will illustrate this. In two proverbs the Banyarwanda say that 'the plant protected by God is never hurt by the wind," and that "God has very long arms.' The Kiga refer to God as 'the One Who makes the sun set'; and when the Gikuyu make sacrifices and prayers for rain, they address God as the One Who makes mountains quake and rivers overflow. The wind, the sun and the rain are beyond human power of control, but not beyond God's power Who works throughthem and other natural phenomena or objects. There are those peoples, like the Akamba, Gikuyu, Teso, Vugusu and others, who see God's omnipotence in terms of His being able to deal with, or control the spirits—these being more powerful thanmen. (MBITI 1970, 41)

Does this mean that God is "all-powerful" as Mbiti (1970, 40) would have us believe? Well, elsewhere, Mbiti tells us that through the names given to God, some African traditional religion practitioners did believe that God was indeed omnipotent.

> In some African languages, we have names of God which speak of him as the All- Powerful, the Almighty, the Irresistible, the Powerful One, the Possessor (or Owner) of all strength, and so on. … Nobody would dare to oppose God, since all power, all strength, all might, belong to him. Because he created all things and governs all things, he must therefore be more mighty and more powerful than all that he has created. (MBITI 1975, 50)

For me, one would have to define the meaning and scope of the term "omnipotence". First, we must imagine God's omnipotence as the capacity and possession of a limited power to create and an unlimited power to uncreate, nothing more. Note, at this point, that this capacity is something different from actually showcasing said powers. In other words, while God is believed to have the capacity for said powers, It usually showcases such powers at Its own will.

Holy/benevolent

In most traditional African religions, God is also seen as holy and benevolent. This idea of holiness is domiciled in the more general understanding of God as a pure being for which goodness, righteousness and holiness are constituent parts of that purity. Consequently, for most African religions, the purity of God, translates to the requirement that the human being ought to be a pure being the moment it begins to approach God. According to Nkulu-N'sengha:

> This purification practice stems from the fundamental belief that God is pure, and therefore it is not suitable to approach God with a "dirty heart" or "dirty hands." The Baluba explicitly state that God is

> spotless, stainless, and blameless (*Vidye kadi katonye*). In the eyes of the Yoruba people, God is "the pure King who is without blemish." Here the Baluba and the Yoruba express a belief common to many other Africans. This notion of God's purity is translated into three other essential attributes of God: holiness, righteousness, and goodness. (NKULU-N'SENGHA 2009, 289)

The logic that grounds this thinking that God is pure, holy and/or good is hard to pinpoint. One route that we might want to consider, again, draws us to the grandeur of nature. The magnificence of things in the world and the intricate relationship (towards harmony) that sustains the universe (ATTOE 2020). The equilibrium the ATAPs must have experienced and the perfect synergy among things in the world must have generated the idea that the curator of the world – its architect – must be, in itself, a perfect being, perfect at least in the knowledge of how the world ought to operate. If this was true, the ATAPs would have concluded that various forms of disharmony, usually caused by some evil or catastrophe, could not have emerged from God and Its perfect blueprint for the world. Indeed, the sustenance of human life through nature, could also only show that God was good and benevolent since it was the case that rather than creating the human being to suffer in the world, It created the human being and provided for the person, a means for which his/her life could be sustained.

This answer is not penetratively satisfying for most contemporary African philosophers such as myself. The earth, as created by God, is not without its terrors and suffering. The hunger that comes with famine, the pain of ill health, the viciousness of certain catastrophes like flooding, etc., and the seed of evil available in every human being and cultivated by some, are just examples of the fact that God's blueprint of the world is a blueprint of good and evil. How did the ATAPs respond to this obvious problem? One way was to lay all the blame on the feet of the human being. According to Nkulu-N'sengha:

> Although many people raise complaints about misfortunes, no African religion considers God to be intrinsically evil. In some proverbs, God is called "the Father Creator Who creates and uncreates." He is considered as intrinsically good and
> the source of any good in human life. The Baluba, Bakongo, Igbo, Herero, and others say categorically that God does them only what is good. The Ewe firmly hold that "He is good, for He has never withdrawn from us the good things whichHe gave us." (NKULU-N'SENGHA 2009, 289)

He also notes:

> This belief in divine purity and goodness is enshrined in timeless cosmogonies. In their numerous creation myths, Africans have wrestled with the question of the origin of evil and suffering. The conclusion is that God is not the source of evil. The myths of the

> origin of suffering stress the responsibility of human beings and present God as pure (Utoka). (NKULU-N'SENGHA 2009, 289)

There is an obvious gap in explanation as far as these ideas are concerned, for it is not merely enough to state that God is ultimately good (and only a source for good), despite the presence of evil in the world. The tactic of placing the blame on the feet of the human being – what Wiredu (2012, 36) calls the "free will excuse" – is an interesting one, and it is one that Kwame Gyekye uses handsomely (GYEKYE 1995). While human relationships foster the type of evil commonly referred to as "man's inhumanity to man", natural disasters are often viewed as expressions of wrath by God or other lesser spirits, over the actions of human beings in the world, which are regarded as evil.

Re-echoing this point, Mbiti notes that:

> It is strongly believed that God rules in perfect justice. Therefore he is also referred to as the Judge. People say that he judges all things justly, distributes all things justly, rescues the oppressed and punishes the wrongdoer. For this reason he is also called the Arbiter of the world. At times he punishes wickedness by means of sickness, disease, accident, famine, drought, storm, war, calamity or even death. Yet people may pray to him to forgive and take away punishment. (MBITI 1975, 46)

In other words, what we call *natural* evil, is nothing more than God's attempt at perfection. By doling out calamities (or perhaps by allowing it), God creates balance. This answer is just too convenient for me, especially seeing that a perfect human being is hard to come by, more so a collection of perfect human beings for whom collective perfection would also be required, if regular bouts of judgment and catastrophe should be avoided. Perhaps this tale of crime and punishment is nothing more than a hidden vestige of colonial religious thinking, or maybe a reflection on the difficulty that abounds in trying to explain an unexpected evil in the light of God's benevolence and holiness.

Furthermore, as a being that is pure, and at the same time all-powerful – especially in relation to created things – it would seem more palatable if God in his power uncreates the evil, and the free will (at least) that spawns evil (and an evil response to evil), and instead creates a world devoid of pain, suffering and sin. One can further argue that perhaps uncreating free will is a more drastic solution, maybe removing evil as a possible option that can present itself to the free being is the more palatable option. There are many options that are unavailable to the human person (for instance jumping up to 5 metres unaided) that does not undermine the popular view that we possess free will. It is unclear how the removal of one more option (the possibility of evil choice) undermines that free will. Indeed, most ATAPs themselves consider God to be incapable of doing evil, but this does not seem to undermine God's free will. These are options that are available to God, and one would think a pure and

brilliant God would prefer the best possible world for the beings that it creates. Unfortunately, the world as we know it cannot be the best possible world if God remains the type of God that most ATAPs have described.

A New Vision of God, and the Problem of Evil

Perhaps God does not possess all these attributes, after all. Babajide Dasaolu hints that in traditional Yoruba thought, "A perusal [of] Ifá[,] the repository of traditional Yorùbá thought system discloses Olódùmarè, the Higher God in Yorùbá world-view as lacking in the attributes of Omnipotence, Omnibenevolence and Omniscience" (DASAOLU 2019, 31). Incredible as this claim may seem, John Bewaji slyly says the same thing but in a different way. God is the most powerful being, the most knowledgeable being. This is agreeable, but it does not mean the same thing as omnipotent or omniscient, respectively. For one can possess the most power in the room, but that is not synonymous with being all-powerful or possessing omnipotence, or, in the case of possessing the most knowledge, possessing omniscience. Indeed, Bewaji warns, "Having avoided the usage of the classical and neo-classical diction of omnipotence, it is also advisable to avoid the nomenclature of omniscience in the description of the over-arching knowledge and wisdom of the Supreme Deity among the Yoruba people" (BEWAJI 1998, 8). Bewaji goes further to submit that the Olodumare is a good judge, perfect in Its decision making. This claim subtly suggests two things. (1) The power to create a society that is bereft of evil does not reside with God (and by extension, any other being), for if that power were in God's hands It would not need to be a judge; or (2) that God may not be all good[2], if we suppose that such powers did reside in It. Bewaji appears to tilt to (2) when he says:

> 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 no[t] 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. (1998, 11)

Either way, what is being called into question is the absolute goodness, power and knowledge of God. No wonder Ada Agada says, "But we are suspicious of the categories of omniscience and omnipotence which bring into question the goodness of God in relation to the undeniable evil in the world. Ours is not a perfect universe but a yearning universe" (2013, 263). Even beyond the Yoruba resistance to the dominant view, Wiredu (expressing Danquah's thoughts), also suggests that some Akan ATAPs do not only recognise the non-absolute nature of God but that they also place It within the domain of ethical struggle. In his words:

[2] In a note contained in his treatment of the Ifa Corpus, Wande Abimbola, claims that the malevolent powers of witches were "given to them by **Olodumare** himself and that is why human beings find it so difficult to overcome the menace of the witches" (ABIMBOLA 1975, 315)

> But, throwing all theodicy to the winds, Danquah (1968: 88–9) claimed that the Akan view (which he seems to have supported) is that, far from God being omnipotent, he, as the 'Nana,' is himself a participant in the struggle to overcome 'physical pain and evil.' (2012, 36)

While, for Agada, God has overcome this ethical cum existential struggle, it seems clear that for the ATAPs that Wiredu and Danquah are talking about, the struggle continues since evil has not left this world. Thus, the absoluteness inserted in our imagined attributes of God, may not represent reality after all. So, if we assume that what Dasaolu says is true of God, then we no longer have a being who can create and uncreate everything in the world, who is all-good and who has supreme knowledge of every actor and factor in the world, as well as the relationships among those actors and factors. This new vision of God reports a God who is powerful, at least more powerful than the human being, but not the most powerful being possible. Beyond the threats and possibilities inherent in a being more powerful than man, and the fact that this being is responsible for our existence, there is no reason to view this God as worthy of worship beyond the way a little child worships her parents.

Such a weakened version of God easily accommodates the problem of evil by dismantling a fundamental assumption that prop up the problem itself – that is, that God is all-powerful and/or all-good. In this light, we no longer have a God-in-control but God-in-partial-control. And so, when King Leopold of Belgium oversees the massacre of millions of Africans, or when a tsunami kills thousands of undeserving children, men and women, one cannot hold God responsible since such things are, in this current vision of God, beyond its control. Indeed, one could further argue that in creating the world, God (as represented in Dasaolu's Yoruba vision of God) may have had good intentions, but by lacking omniscience, it may have been impossible to envision the evil that this world would produce. One could even argue that this world of some good and many evils, may have been the plan after all since, in this vision of God, the property of omnibenevolence is absent. Thus, the question of why evil is sustained in a world created and governed by a necessarily holy, good and all-powerful God is answered by the simple retort that the God that governs this world is neither all-good (holiness disappears here) nor all-powerful. Thus, in this vision, one can imagine contexts in which God is good and contexts where God is bad. Even goodness and evil could even depend on individual contexts – colonialism being a bad thing if one is African, and a good thing if one is racist and imperialist. This vision, thus, aligns with the three-value logic that is dominant in African thought.

Thus, one can say that in one African view, the problem of evil loses its potency since some of the crucial assumptions of the dominant vision of God are discarded in favour of a leaner vision of God that fully accommodates the possibility of evil within its purview. But what about the dominant view, and how does one successfully accommodate the presence of evil in the world with the vision of a necessarily good, holy and all-powerful God? Can our

three-value logic work in this particular instance? I do not think it works, since the vision of God in the dominant view, is a vision of an absolute God, and so even within the purview of Ezumezu logic where *context upsets fact* (CHIMAKONAM 2019), it is rather the case that *God upsets contexts* since God is absolute (necessarily holy, all-powerful and all-knowing). Hence, the answer to the first question is simply that we cannot accommodate the dominant vision of God. Thus, rather than contort the dominant vision of God and evil in unremarkable and painful ways, just to sustain all the variables in that vision, perhaps we must take a cue and listen to what that contradiction is telling us: we must search for another vision that tells a more plausible tale. Here, the Yoruba vision is instructive, for, in the face of the problem of evil, they refused to contort but rather weakened their notion of God, shedding away those attributes of God that they found to be at odds with reality. What this tells me is that to properly tackle the problem of evil, we must properly examine the idea of God, perhaps redefine It, in order to discover the extent to which the problem of evil is actually a problem. We know that there is evil in the world and we can point to various instances of it, but the idea of God has been so left to the human imagination that the ideas we have about God have now become, for the most part, a figment of our imaginations.

Redefining God

Let us try to bring down the African notion of God from the lofty heights of absolutism, which we have placed it, to the surgical table of criticality and try our best to excise the imaginative from the critically speculative. So far I have shown moments of doubt, where the Yoruba ATAPs have, according to Dasaolu's reading of the Ifa Corpus, questioned the idea of God's omnibenevolence, omnipotence and omniscience. We have also seen how that one stroke of ancient genius has normalised the problem of evil and, quite really, made it a non-problem. I believe we can go a few steps further and in ways that are important to the discourse on the problem of evil from an African perspective. But why is this revision important? As philosophers, when we say a thing exists, we prefer to refer to ideas and entities that are either concrete or logically necessary. And so we decide that God exists because it is logically necessary for a first cause to have always existed since alternative explanations like an infinite regress, do not explain the reality of things in the world (See for instance: ATTOE 2022, Chapter 2). However, this first cause, this God, is largely beyond the purview of our senses, and so we have no sensual relationship with It beyond its creations. What about the other attributes we gladly assign to God? If we cannot correlate them sensually, can we do so logically, and in a necessary way? When the ATAPs of the Massai, Lunda and Ngombe schools of thought opined that God was unknowable, these were the sorts of questions that allowed them to make that conclusion. One particular assumption is what I tackle here.

There are many attributes that African scholars and/or ATAPs have attached to God. But all these attributes all come together in, and are all tied

to, one grand attribute. It is on this grand attribute that current ideas about God are woven together. This attribute or idea is the idea that God is a personalised entity – a conscious Subject. God is thought of in much the same way that we think about human personalities, only much more powerful. So we believe that God can choose to be bad or good, has free will, can punish, can love, can know, can distribute vitality, can create and uncreate, can heal and perform miracles, etc. Only a *personalised* entity with a level of consciousness that is, at least, at the human level, can perform these sorts of actions. Rocks, presumably, can't (unless you are an extreme panpsychist or an extreme vitalist). That much is clear, but is it really a logically necessary claim to make? I do not think that it is.

We often like to trace the world back to a first cause, which would then be responsible for things in the world, and like I alluded to earlier, this is the most plausible route to God as far as the limits of our minds are concerned. Why is this route plausible or possible? The answer is that we implicitly or (as for me) explicitly pay homage to a deterministic outlook in our discussions about reality. By tracing reality back to a first cause, we are both saying that the world could not have been the way it is without a first cause and that it is because of that first cause that the world is exactly the way it is now. A different world governed by different laws of nature, and we have a different God, who would most likely not be viewed strictly in terms of a first cause.

If what I say is true, then we can deduce a few things. First, this world is a predeterministic world. Predeterministic in the sense that the full spectrum of existence is set in motion solely by the nature of the first cause itself, and necessarily so[3]. Second, that this world is the way it is because of the first cause (God) immediately suggests an enveloping influence of God on the material world. Now influence on things in the world is a defining feature of material things, whether this influence is direct or indirect (especially of logical/mathematical necessity). I know that a fist is material, especially when it directly influences the arrangement of another person's cheekbones, and I know that gravity is material because even though I do not sense it, it follows logically as the reason why my body remains grounded on earth and not floating in space. This necessarily invites us to think of God as a material being since God's influence in this world lies at the very core of the way the world is.

If we now have a material God, need that God be conscious? To answer this question, we must return to the creation process. In much of African metaphysics, relationality is necessary, since being alone is impossible (IROEGBU 1995, ASOUZU 2004, ASOUZU 2007). What this means is that God, in African thought, must bow before the necessity of relationality. How does a relationship begin? First, you need at least two actors or factors to be

[3] Elsewhere, I provide the framework for an Afican predeterministic metaphysic. I explore this point in some detail there. See: Attoe (2022).

present. One would imagine that interaction between those (f)actors require a direct entanglement, but I have come to discover that immediately two (f)actors are present, a relationship becomes necessary – they do not need to entangle themselves. The very presence of two peas in a pod implies a new state of affairs (two peas in a pod) that did not exist before (one pea in a pod, just the pod, or nothing). A new state of affairs, or a new creation, can only be a product of relationality, and it is a necessary product. I enjoin you to hold these present thoughts for a moment, I will get back to it.

While African religions have supplied us with various stories about the creative process, these stories are mostly myths and a few of them are metaphors that require deep thinking. Today, we have scientific stories about the origin of the world, and more and more, while these scientific stories are backed up by evidence, the chances that certain stories (like a cockerel being part of the creation process) are more and more unlikely. The most prominent of these stories is the big bang theory (SMITH 1994, SEIBERT 2001), and this story is evidenced by the supposedly real accelerated expansion of the universe and the presence of background radiation left behind by that most critical expansion. As the story goes, the Universe began from a condensed point of energy and rapidly unfurled into the world we have today.

When we combine this story with our thoughts about the power of relationality, we immediately see that creation need not be a conscious affair. It only needs to be a matter of relationality. In what ways was the first cause relational? We can think of the first cause as either a singular reality or a complex combination of singular realities (ATTOE 2022). In the first instance, we see that such a singular being, still a being in the world (albeit a formless world) since absolute nothingness is impossible, is a being that is in a necessary relationship with the formless world. And since relationships necessarily create, the relationship between that singular being and the formless world creates a new state of affairs – (at the very least) the first cause in a world. The regressive eternality of the first cause[4] ensures that prior to the existence of other things in the world, there was a constant state of relationality (the first cause and its environment) and creation (the state of affairs of a singular reality in an environment). This combined state is at once complementary and contextual, the absolute expression of Ezumezu logic. It is complementary in that it all fits to describe that particular state of affairs, and it is contextual in the sense that one could see the relationality among things or the state of affairs, depending on what one was looking for. Thus, the reality of the first cause, reflected, at once, the creator and the created. The new state of affairs of singular reality + environment/formless world, could not have been an idle one, because it was a relational state of affairs, one that had to

[4] It is regressively eternal because as a first cause it must necessarily exist, but we cannot know for certain if the first cause necessarily continues to exist since there are now other things in the world. Does it stay on or does it morph and dissolve into the newer realities, is a question for another project.

necessarily produce a new state of affairs. One can then imagine that it was from this tension that other states of affairs, involving other things, had to emerge. In all this, what necessitated creation was not a consciousness but the necessity of relationality among things. Even if one conceived God as a complex being, that complex God would have had to be made of singular realities. Admitting that those singular components were the same as God would be wrong if the fallacy of composition means anything. If God is a complex conscious being, then God would have found its origin in the true first cause – singular realities. Those component singular realities would have expressed a more potent relationality, one that would have produced God, as a new state of affairs, or the big bang, as scientists tell us (altogether bypassing a conscious God as the first cause).

If all this is at least plausible, then we must aggressively revisit the notion of a conscious first cause. The fact is that consciousness first requires relationality, and relationality, itself, requires singular realities. If singular realities constitute the first cause – our God – then it becomes moot to also talk of a gendered Supreme Being that is all-powerful, all-knowing and necessarily good. For what we call the Supreme being is nothing more than being in its most ancient, unconscious and its simplest form.

This revelation, if plausible, implies a lot. First is the obvious suggestion that the idea of a general overseer of the world, who is necessarily holy, all-powerful and benevolent, is an implausible one. And so the idea that it is somehow the responsibility of God to mitigate evil, and that It either fails to do so or fails to exist, is a moot one. This new African vision of the Supreme being does not include, as a property of God, consciousness or personality. Second, that we find and encounter evil in the world is simply because evil is a by-product of different levels of relationality, historically traceable to the first cause. And what really is evil? Evil is harm, and the concept of harm is an anthropocentric concept that simply reflects our understanding that a certain event, occurrence or encounter is not to our benefit or not to the benefit of those to whom we are empathetic. Our ability to understand what state of affairs some relationships potentially hold (what some would call causality), we have the terrifying capacity[5] to also predict what would not be of interest to people we do not like, so we can also fantasize about causing harm or pain to others. This is evil. So it is not only that the supreme being is not a personalised entity, it is also that the idea of evil is itself a construct of the human mind, brought about by our relationship with other things/people in the world. As Bewaji notes:

> Nothing is intrinsically evil. We call something evil because it does not favor us or because it causes us distress. We may not know or

[5] Ada Agada (2013, 258) calls it a “fearful capacity of thought”.

> understand the reason for the event or action, but ultimately it forms part of the overall design of Olodumare [God]. (1998, 11)

Thus, Epicurus' challenge to those who look up to an Olympus of some sort, is built on unrealistic expectations – the expectation of a type of God that possesses the capacity to intervene (especially in a world that is already predetermined), and the expectation that a category of the human mind can manifest as a concrete reality in the material world, such that another being can eradicate it[6]. Outside the movement of impulses through nerve cells that tell our brain that an event, situation or act is not to our benefit, there is no evil. And so to eradicate evil, one must eradicate the human species, and every species that is capable of isolating, in abstract terms, the idea of "what is not in my interest". What the ideas of our African philosophical ancestors have inadvertently taught us is that we live in a world that is necessarily indifferent to our feelings of harm, if it must remain a predeterministic world. For the trajectory of the world is set, and historically traceable to the first cause. And we are part of a world whose relationship with us is not dependent on our whim or our preference, but is/was rather dependent on the very nature of the first cause. Thus, my African-inspired response to the problem of evil is this:

In a predeterministic world that is indifferent to our plight, evil is fully captured but only as a category of mind/brain in its encounter with things that do not benefit our survival. While evil is lodged in our brains, God can do nothing about it for God is just a simple being. A singular reality whose only power lies in Its being a first cause, and by extension, a determiner of the trajectory of the world. This simple being cannot alter this predetermined world in a bid to exorcise the concept of evil from our minds, mainly because it is a being without consciousness.

Conclusion

What have we learnt so far? One takeaway is that as thinkers, we must constantly re-evaluate our views, and converse with them, lest they become so logically stale that we begin to consider them to be truths. The problem of evil applies only to those notions of God that speak of God in morally absolute terms. While thinking of God in absolute terms remains the dominant view, it is soothing that some ATAPs did not let the conversation die, and in their struggle with the notion of God, they weakened their notion of God. This weakening began the journey into accommodating the idea of God and the notion of evil, without controversy. What I have attempted to do, in this article, is to further the conversation by weakening our ideas about the nature of God and deriving, from that weakening, a novel notion of God that better

[6] Perhaps, the problem itself was not the point. Perhaps the problem of evil was articulated as a means of drawing our attention to the mischaracterization of God by human, and not as a means of merely pointing to some cosmic contradiction.

accommodates our ideas of God with the notion of evil. What I look forward to is how (African) philosophers react to my present notion of God, and how the conversation can continue even further.

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