

## **EVIL AND THE PROBLEM OF DIVINE BENEVOLENCE: A PROPAEDEUTIC READING OF AN AGE-OLD PUZZLE\***

Dr. Christopher Agulanna  
Department of Philosophy  
University of Ibadan  
Ibadan, Nigeria

### **INTRODUCTION**

Evil exists in the world. This statement is poignant and incontrovertible. It is the least controversial claim anyone could ever make about the nature of reality or of the world itself. The other is that the problem of evil is perhaps one of the most confusing, troubling and difficult problems that confront human beings. All through the history of thought, there have been thinkers who tried to downplay the enormity of the problem, or otherwise try to wash it away. But try as they may, evil remains one of the most intricate problems that human beings have to deal with in their day-to-day existence in the world. In the genre of philosophy known as metaphysics evil is usually characterized as one of the perennial problems that philosophers have to grapple with. In the field of *philosophy of religion*, the reality of evil continues to be something of an intellectual dilemma for the major thinkers. Conceptually, the problem of evil revolves around the apparent contradiction of the evils that confront us in the world and the claim that such a benighted order of things is governed by Divine Intelligence.

The problem of evil in a world supposedly governed by a benevolent deity remains the greatest challenge to the issue of religious faith and believing. With all the ills and calamities that bestride the world, how true is the religious argument that the ultimate Power of the universe is benevolent and is kindly disposed to his creatures? Most non-theistic humanists are likely to answer this question by repining at the idea that the universe is governed by a benevolent or Divine Intelligence. In responding to the question above, some commentators argue that “the best we can say, viewing the world as it is, is that its cause is not malevolent but indifferent to suffering.”<sup>1</sup> The logic of this argument is that against some opinions which see evil as nonexistent or a mere illusion of the senses, the truth of the matter is that the reality of evil is not to be doubted. Having

made this few general remarks, the conceptual issue here is to pose the question: How may we characterize or define so intricate a problem as “the problem of evil”?

### **Evil as An Inexplicable Mystery**

In responding to the query above, I must say in all honesty, that the question posed does not yield to an easy answer or to any clear explanation. The reason is: that evil is not only an elusive concept, but also a problem that stupefies the human ratiocinative capacity. All through time, various scholars have tried to explicate or develop a theory of the nature of evil without much success. For example, in the monism of the Vedanta teachings of Hinduism, the phenomenal world with all its evils is described as *maya* or mere illusion. This idea is also developed in the contemporary Christian Science doctrine where evil is not only visualized as an illusory phenomenon but also as a “false belief.” Numerous other thinkers and philosophical schools, as we shall see in a moment, have also tried to explain what evil signifies but have been unsuccessful in their attempts. Perhaps, it is for this reason that Lance Morrow describes it as a mystery – the *mysterium iniquitas*. Evil, he says, is both sly and bizarre. We cannot know it systematically or scientifically; for it is brutal and elusive, “by turns vivid and vague, horrible and subtle. We can know it poetically, symbolically, historically, emotionally. We can know it by its works.”<sup>2</sup> The *works* of evil will include such things as sickness and diseases; earthquakes and destruction; sorrow and pain; anguish and suffering, etc. The list is open-ended.

So then, the problem of evil is an insuperable one. Not only is evil an inexplicable reality, it is as well a problem as old as the world itself. How is it possible, for example, to justify the existence of radical evil? How is it possible to understand the suffering of the innocent? Of all the manifestations of evil, perhaps the greatest and most terrifying is death. The phenomenon of death is sometimes defined simply as “perishing,” that is, the ending of that which lives. For Epicurus of old, death means “extinction” or the extinguishing of human life and consciousness. It is “a state,” after the cessation of consciousness or the breath where there is no more “I.” This is a *state* too fearful to imagine or conceptualize. Little wonder Albert Camus remonstrates against the idea of death saying: “Men Die; and they are not happy.” Worse still, they “weep because the world’s all wrong.”<sup>3</sup> Indeed, most people see this life of abject fear as quite unbearable –

worse than death itself! We will only be tinkering at the edges of so terrible a problem if we simply say of death that it is an “entwinement;” it is this and much more: it is as well, a separation – a cessation of the lived body and a slow decay of the physical one. As O. H Green puts the matter, as that which frustrates all forms of human desires, “death is the ultimate impediment to human functioning and so may be seen as an objective evil for man.”<sup>4</sup>

So far, I have merely nibbled at the issue of focus in the paper, but in a manner that is literary and poetic. In what follows below, I look at the issue under consideration in the essay more paradigmatically so as to conjure up the various methods that scholars have adopted in the treatment of the problem of evil. But before I get into the discussion in more detail, I must make the point, which is that evil is something which crushes the human spirit and renders existence meaningless and grotesque. John Hick captures the matter more vividly when he makes the following remark:

The problem of evil concerns the contradiction, or apparent contradiction, between the reality of evil on the other hand, and religious beliefs in the goodness and power of God or the ultimate on the other.<sup>5</sup>

Hick’s statement in the quotation above merely underscores the fact that evil is not only a reality but it is as well, the greatest challenge to religious faith and belief in a providential deity. As a challenge to religion, the problem of evil has been traditionally formulated in the form of a dilemma: if God is all powerful, he must be able to prevent evil. But evil exists. Therefore, God is either not all-powerful or not all-good.<sup>6</sup> But evil is not only a painful reality, but it is also “dark, menacingly ugly, heart-rending and crushing.”<sup>7</sup> Evil, according to this line of argument, is something which renders life opaque and futile.

### **Evil: A Retraction**

But agreed that evil does have the character of which the scholars speak; can we from this fact draw the inference (as some scholars do) that human existence is pointless, and that the world is an inane and gratuitous place? Or that our life on earth is meaningless and absurd? Against this type of conclusion, human experience actually suggests that the world does not only contain events that are hideous and ugly. Rather,

there are also aspects of our worldly experiences that are beautiful, meretricious and comely. In the same way, we are not only confronted with unpleasant situations in life; on the contrary, we sometimes are comforted by the feeling that there is also a sunny side to life! The crucial issue then is to inquire into the significance of ugliness and beauty! If the ugly and bad events of life show that the world is faulty and irredeemable, what do the good and beautiful events signify? That the world has purpose and direction? Or that human experience is an admixture of the good and the bad, the ugly and the beautiful? Perhaps we should not yet seek an answer at this point in the discussion. Suffice it to say that for many people in the world, human life is worth living in spite of the daily challenges they face in the world. Indeed, the issue of religious believing boils down, in the end, to faith. But to say this does not, however, commit us to the claim or position that the claims of faith cannot be criticized or proved to be wrong. On contrary, what it does commit us to is to argue, as Blaise Pascal did, that in the final analysis, faith is a big “leap in the dark.” Immanuel Kant seems to have agreed this much because for him, the existence or non-existence of God cannot be proved by argument but is simply a postulate or pre-supposition of morality.

The issues I have sketched above shall form the background to the paper. In the paper, I have set for myself the task of accomplishing three major things. First, I discuss the age-old issue of the meaning and nature of evil in a world purportedly governed by Divine Intelligence. Second, I make a historical run-down of how the major thinkers have tried to grapple with the problem, showing the strengths and weaknesses in their doctrines or arguments. In the third and final part of the paper I discuss how evil is conceived and interpreted in the African cosmogony and social life. The conclusion I reach in the paper is that the inference from the fact that we experience evil in the world to the conclusion that it is a world of inanity and absurdity is tendentious and hasty. Such a conclusion arises from a limited or partial view of reality; a failure on our part, to borrow Spinoza’s catch-phrase, to view the world under the form of eternity (*sub specie aeternitatis*). The only inference about the effect of evil that is supported by experience is to admit that ours is a world where the good and the bad play out themselves. But the conversation concerning the existence and nature of evil has been from ages past. In what follows below, I make a historical run-down of the ways philosophers have grappled with

this intractable problem from the time of recorded history. My point of departure in this analysis will be the philosophers of classical antiquity, that is, the early Greek philosophers.

### **An Account of Evil from The History of Philosophy**

The narrative on the motif of evil has a long history; dating back to the period of classical antiquity. For the philosophers, the account on evil has remained as divergent as there are schools of philosophy. An elaboration of this last point will suffice here to explain the issue better. I begin my illustration with the Stoic philosophers of ancient Greek society. Among the Stoics, it was held that the universe was governed by rigid and inexorable natural laws. In such a world there is nothing as chance; whatever happens, happens in line with God's foreordained or eternal purpose. The events of life all add up to play their divinely assigned in the overall working of nature. Following this line of reasoning, the Stoic philosophers held that the idea of evil arises from an insufficient understanding of the nature of the world and of natural events. According to them, everything that exists in the world exists as an integral part of God's eternal plan and contributes towards the order and harmony we experience in the world. What this type of narrative sets out to do is to make evil lose the negative connotation that it has. So then, evil, following the Stoic valuation is to be understood as a non-reality.

Like the Stoic philosophers before him, Plotinus, the last of the major Greek philosophers, depicted evil as a 'negation' or a 'privation of being'. Plotinus' conception of reality is extremely otherworldly: the intelligible world is made up of an ordering principle known as the One. The two other essential principles that flow or emanate from it are Mind and Soul. In this conception of reality, Matter is conceived as nonbeing, absolute formlessness. It is "the darkness into which the One shines [...] the evil principle."<sup>8</sup> Unlike some who were in the habit of despising the material world as hopeless; a place fit only to be fled from, Plotinus held that the world had some delight of its own which we need to appreciate. But even at that, evil according to Plotinus arises in the emanation of the One in material form. As long as we are in this material world and are attached to material things, we cannot avoid evil. Many religious polities as well as philosophical schools have expressed this type of opinion: evil and suffering arise when human beings attach themselves to the material and fleeting things of this world; a life of

asceticism and detachment from excessive material pursuits liberates and promoted harmony in the mind. Whether or not this opinion is true is beside the point. What is at issue here is that Plotinus, like many others tries to go round the problem of evil by denying its reality. Whether he succeeds in this is another matter altogether.

Meanwhile, in medieval times, the philosophers of that era were also involved in this game of denying the reality of evil. For example, St. Augustine, one of the greatest Christian philosophers of all time, held that moral evil results from man's misuse of his freewill. In tandem with the orthodox Christian view on sin and the penalty thereof, St. Augustine described death (a form of evil) as punishment for sin; the only way to overcome the fear of it, he says, is through divine grace. Essentially, Augustine described evil as nonbeing because for him all being is necessarily good. Everything God has created, even evil, has its place in ensuring the universal harmony we experience in nature. Like Augustine, St. Aquinas depicted evil as a 'purely negative' occurrence: it has no 'formal' cause because its form is nothing but the privation or absence of good.<sup>9</sup> "Evil is unintentional, not an essence, and has an accidental cause which is good."<sup>10</sup>

Following in the heels of the philosophers of the scholastic era, Spinoza denied the existence of evil in the world. According to him, whatever happens in life is part of the eternal timeless world as God sees it. The idea of evil, Spinoza avers, comes from an inadequate knowledge of reality. When we see the world as God sees it, *sub specie aeternitatis* (under the form of eternity), we will come to the realization that that the knowledge of evil only arises "through regarding parts of the universe as if they were self-subsistent."<sup>11</sup> Evil, according to Spinoza, is part of the way God expresses himself in nature. On his part, Leibniz identified three kinds of evil, namely, metaphysical evil, physical evil, and moral evil. Metaphysical evil, according to him, arises out of the imperfections inherent in creatures. Physical evil (such as earthquakes, flood, diseases, sickness and death) is also inevitable because it is part of the system of the universe. Moral evil on its part is due to man's misuse of his free will.

I now take a long leap from the modern era to the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries and discuss briefly how some religious thinkers have dealt with the problem of evil. In the history of religion, I make bold to say that the Catholic Church more than any other religious group has produced the most consistent religious theodicy or defense of the

justice of God in establishing a world in which evil subsists. Saints Augustine and Aquinas whose views I have discussed briefly above; as well as myriad other Catholic philosopher-theologians have dealt with this problem at different epochs of the Church's history. Whether or not their views have been satisfactory or otherwise succeeded in resolving the quandary or dilemma of evil is a matter for another paper. Suffice it to say that scholars have produced very interesting narratives on the dilemma of evil that have kept the intellectual debate going. This has also served to promote the healthy tradition of debate and argumentation on which the activity of philosophy has thrived through its history. Close to our own century is one important Catholic theologian who also intellectualized on the problem of evil: the Jesuit priest, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881-1955). In his account, de Chardin presented an imaginative and original view of the development of the universe which for him is evolving through a long and gradual process. He depicted the history of the universe as "a dynamic evolutionary movement in which the basic stuff of the cosmos is continually undergoing irreversible changes in the direction of greater complexity of organization."<sup>12</sup> Teilhard de Chardin conceives evil essentially as a disorder - a disorder which is inevitable in an evolutionary system. For him, the problem of evil does not arise when we understand the world in its true perspective, that is, as a dynamic evolutionary world which is not yet a finished product but one which is still in the process of formation or development.

With the exception of the thinkers of the medieval or scholastic era, most religious people now agree that evil exists; it's only that they would see it as *ennobling* and *redemptive* in character! For example, religious believers would often say that suffering is not an absolute evil but as that which has redeeming features. It may sometimes be, we are told, an occasion for "spiritual growth" and an opportunity to make amend for sins committed. This is the type of conclusion reached by thinkers like Augustine and Aquinas; it is also the way most believers conceive of evil in general.

A somewhat quite different view on evil is that expressed by contemporary Christian Science, where the existence of evil is not only denied, but also described as an illusion of the mind. I have already alluded to the Christian Science position earlier in the discussion. However, this position is fraught with a number of problems. For one, it is not in tandem with modern Christian view on the matter. For another, the stark reality of evil

in the world makes such a claim too difficult to accept. More importantly, the unsavoury problems of human anguish coupled with the pains people experience in a seemingly abstruse and futile world all make the claim less attractive. To define evil as an “illusion” of the mind will amount to giving a facile answer to a problem that is serious and disturbing. At best it will amount to a sleight-of-hand sophistry which will amount to nothing but an intellectual fraud!

### **Evil: An Illustrative irony**

The point made in the last part of the preceding paragraph brings to mind the story of a *Hasidic Rabbi* who was once asked by a student, “Why should we praise God for the evil things that happen as well as the good things?” The Rabbi replied that the question was too difficult for him to answer and advised his student to consult a certain holy man who had been beaten and tortured during a pogrom. When the student located the holy man, who lay bleeding and dying and asked him the question, the holy man replied: “I cannot answer you, because nothing evil ever happened to me!”<sup>13</sup> There is no doubt but that the holy man’s answer is as evasive as it is unconvincing. Anyway, not many of people will share his type of faith, because even among religious people the reality of evil is something that is generally acknowledged. The only thing is that some are likely to suggest that “evils are necessary for tempering the souls of human beings and testing their worthiness for salvation.”<sup>14</sup> Other people are likely to consider evil as the inevitable outcome of human folly or a *justifiable* punishment for sin.

There are, however, a number of other theistic thinkers who hold views on God and on religion that are unorthodox and somewhat weird in interpretation. For these thinkers, evil can only be overcome when we realize that God is a being who suffers with the suffering humanity. One such thinker is the Spanish philosopher Miguel De Unamuno, who advanced the argument about God being a suffering deity who suffers and feels our pains. It is because God suffers with us that he is able to love and care for us. According to Unamuno, there can be no true love “save in suffering.” Arguing in the same vein, B.Z. Cooper makes the following statement saying: “We can say that suffering is the way that God has his Deity; that is, God’s way of suffering is his deity.”<sup>15</sup> For most Christian apologists in general, God is said to *care* about human pain and misery. He cares so much that he came to “share” in it. According to this argument, “it is

only belief in a suffering God that stops us from ... going out of our minds at all the suffering which afflicts our world.”<sup>16</sup>

The idea of God as a suffering Deity is an idea located within a strand of Western philosophy known as *Process philosophy*. In particular, it is an idea formed within the framework of the metaphysics of Hegel and Alfred North Whitehead. As Martin Walsh explains the matter, in Whitehead’s valuation of things, God is not seen in terms of an Aristotelian *Unmoved Mover* exhibiting no concern for the processes that go on in the universe nor is he the *Caesar-like* figure of medieval philosophy who bestrode the world like a colossus or a despotic overlord. Rather, “he is the God of love, the ‘lure’ for feeling, the ‘object of desire’. He is the principle of concretion whereby actual processes take their rise” in nature.<sup>17</sup> Conceived this way, reality becomes a temporal process, with human beings said to live in a world that is in the making (or being born) instead of one that is. Following this line of thinking, the categories of being and substance become replaced with the categories of *becoming* and *activity*. In the same way, special emphasis is laid on the idea of creativity, the emergence of novelty and the organic interdependence of all things.

The God of *Process philosophy* is not the all-powerful and immutable God that religions speak of. Rather, he is portrayed as a being that is developing, evolving and progressing towards its goal of self-completeness, self-consciousness and self-perfection. Again, he is a God who changes along with the historic-cosmic process, and suffers along with suffering humanity.<sup>18</sup> Definitely, this God who is said to be held down by matter and is struggling to free himself from the brute matter that weighs him down cannot be the God of religion self-subsisting. The philosophers who advanced the idea of a suffering God were no doubt trying to solve the problem of evil, which as we have identified, is an ineluctable problem. But the major problem with this idea is that it is not only unorthodox but renders God helpless, impotent and powerless. The thought of an impotent deity labouring and struggling to liberate itself from mere base matter that weighs it down can hardly inspire confidence and hope in worshippers. Besides, such an idea is bound to horrify and astound the believers!

### **A Different View**

The opinions on evil expressed by the philosophical luminaries mentioned above have neither succeeded in resolving once-and-for-all the dilemma of evil, nor otherwise, eliminated the sense of its perennity. Indeed many commentators would regard such views as unavailing and as attempts to evade a problem that is self-evident and palpable to the senses. For most thinkers of a realistic bent, evil is a benumbing reality- a reality that is noisome and intractable in nature. The problem of evil revolves around the apparent contradiction of evil in a world said to have been designed by an all-powerful and infinitely good God. Whichever way one tries to deal with this age-old puzzle, it simply remains irresolvable. While some thinkers try to minimize the sense of anguish caused by the reality of evil by referring to it as “an illusion of the mind,” or a “privation of being,” tough-minded thinkers refuse to be razzle-dazzled by such emotional and apologetic effusions. For this latter group of thinkers, not only is evil a stupefying and an unavoidable reality, its very presence in the world renders the human condition tragic. Accepting that evil has the character of which this group of thinkers speaks of, the individual is then advised to *accept* and clearheadedly acknowledge such ills and adversities as disease, sicknesses and death. In the paragraphs that follow, I shall consider the viewpoints of some of the thinkers I have described as *tough-minded*. The natural starting point in this regard would be David Hume. Indeed, Hume was the philosopher above others produced the most devastating argument against religion, particularly the design argument.

### **Hume on Design and Evil**

The intractable nature of evil as well as the sheer weight of its impact on human life and existence has befuddled all thinkers in all epochs of history. But some atheistic or agnostic thinkers have provided insights on the meaning and significance of evil that are diametrically opposed to the views of the philosophers I discussed in the preceding paragraphs above. David Hume is one such thinker whose views on religion has had a devastating effect on religious faith and believing. In his discourse on the twin notions of design and evil, Hume adopts the instrumentality of three fictitious characters to converse on nature of the evil we are accustomed with in the world. These characters are: Demea,

who is conservative and orthodox; Cleanthes, who foists arguments in defense of theism; and the skeptical Philo, who is Hume himself.

In their conversation on evil, Demea does not deny, but acknowledges the reality of evil in the world. But he thinks we should be consoled by the fact that the evils we find in life is assuaged or will be rectified “in other regions, and in some future period of existence.” On his part, Cleanthes admits that human existence is filled with misery and pain. But he posits that these are mitigated by the overwhelming weight of happiness and pleasure which Divine benevolence has bestowed upon the world. But Philo (Hume) thinks that experience fails to support the theistic arguments that try to smoothen evil as if it were something pleasant or benign. At best these arguments are sophistic or sleight-of-the-hand claims meant to titillate or confuse our imaginations. According to Hume, experience shows that

The whole earth ...is cursed and polluted.... All the goods of life united would not make a very happy man, but all the ills united would make a wretch indeed; and any one of them almost (and who can be free fro every one of them?), nay, often the absence of one good (and who can possess all?) is sufficient to render life ineligible.<sup>19</sup>

For Hume, the reality of evil in the world makes religious preachments not only loathsome but also contemptible. In his *Natural History of Religion*, Hume traced the ‘origin’ of religion from the hopes and fears of men who were confronted with the overwhelming power of nature: “Our ignorant ancestors inevitably interpreted natural events as analogous to the consequences of human volitions, and invented not one but a great number of invisible intelligent powers to preside over the various divisions of the world and human interests.”<sup>20</sup> The gods being conceived on the analogy of human tyrants, religious observances, says Hume, took on all the repulsive aspects of flattery appropriate thereto.

Hume riles at the religious idea that the Ultimate Power of the universe is a loving and caring creature, and that sufferings we experience will redound to our good in the end. He sees the whole earth as cursed and polluted; the absence of one “good,” he says, is sufficient to render life ineligible. At this point it should be pointed out that Hume’s attack on religion was not necessarily meant to *demolish* it altogether, but to

accomplish a definite and limited task: to show that the inference from the alleged design in nature to an infinitely wise, powerful, and good Author of nature is invalid. For Hume, the best we can say, viewing the world as it is, is what its cause is not malevolent but indifferent to suffering. With regards to the nature or structure of the universe, Hume argues as follows:

The whole presents nothing but the idea of a blind nature, impregnated by a great vivifying principle, and pouring forth from her lap, without discernment or parental care, her maimed and abortive children!<sup>21</sup>

But Hume is not alone in asserting that evil renders the universe an inane and futile place. For most non-theistic absurdist thinkers, it is the appalling depth and extent of human suffering, more than anything else that makes the idea of a loving creator seem so implausible and dispose them toward one or another of the various naturalistic theories of religion.

### **The Absurdist Claim**

Hume was not alone in depicting the world as a polluted and corrupted place. The absurdist thinkers also paint a saturnine picture of the world as a place that is hideous; that is, a world despoiled by the monstrosity of the evil and human anguish. The foremost absurdist thinker the world has produced is in my thinking the French novelist and philosopher, Albert Camus. For Camus, evil is neither an illusion nor a mere appearance; rather it is a reality which removes all meaning from existence. The recurrent evils of life, according to Camus are fear, disease, old age and death. Men are “crushed down” and rendered helpless by this “irreparable discovery.”<sup>22</sup> Writing in the same vein, C. I. Glicksberg depicts the human person as a “victim” who fights in vain against evil; his only redeeming feature is to be found in his courageous refusal to be taken in by illusion.<sup>23</sup>

Death then is the supreme evil not only because it frustrates all forms of human desires but because it is “the ultimate impediment to human functioning.”<sup>24</sup> But as Glicksberg further points out, man strives to shut out the truth about the absurdity of death or of his earthly condition; but try as he may, he cannot run away from himself or his knowledge of the absurd. “It pursues him, this knowledge of the absurd, wherever he

goes. There is no cure, he realizes, for the wound inflicted by death, the fate which crowns his absurd destiny. Death is not only universal and inescapable but [it is] also horrible and disturbing.”<sup>25</sup>

It is evident from what has been said so far that evil is a problem that cannot be mitigated. For Jean-Paul Sartre, “evil cannot be redeemed.” Knowing its cause neither reduces its effect nor dispels it.<sup>26</sup> To put the issue matter-of-factly, evil is a problem that glares at us, and stares us in the face. It is also the cause of much distress and anguish to the human heart. And as I have said in the paper already, the reality of evil in the world poses perhaps the greatest challenge to religious faith and believing. The objection to belief in a providential deity challenges religion on both intellectual and moral levels. For most atheistic thinkers, the evil and imperfections of the world defeat the claim that its creator is both all-powerful and perfectly loving. It is for this reason that many of them reject the teachings of religion as patently untrue.

### **The Problem of Evil: The African Perspective**

Evil is a universal human problem. There is no culture or society in the world where the problem does not pose a serious concern to the people. Whether in Europe, Asia, America or Africa, the problem of evil remains persistent, conspicuous and unrelenting. As with other parts of the world, in Africa evil is also a subject of intense concern not only to the scholars but also to the ordinary people in the community who are crushed by the sufferings they experience in the world. Like peoples of other societies, Africans also brood at the idea of the nullity and utter emptiness of human existence. The following preliminary questions are relevant at this point in the discussion: is humanity under the sentence of death? How do Africans grapple with the reality of human anguish and the evils that confront them in life? I shall seek to provide answers to these questions in the discussion that follows below.

Addressing the queries above, I should also mention the fact that African scholars are not left out in the debate on the dilemma of evil. To help our understanding of the African perspective on the problem of evil, a number of other important questions would need to be posed. Some of these questions are captured as follows: Do Africans regard evil as something imaginary- a figment of the human imagination; or do they see it as something real and palpable to the senses? Do they admonish people, as is the case in

some aspects of Oriental thought (e.g., Buddhism), that humans cope with evil? Finally, do Africans try to downplay the reality of evil (as in the manner of Christian Science), or do they (as in the case with some sections of Western thought) try to deny its reality?

These questions are essential to an understanding of the African viewpoint on the problem under consideration. In trying to answer them, I wish to reiterate a point alluded to already in the paper, which is that Africans do not deny the reality of evil in the world. This is the point E. I. Metuh makes when he avers that for the African the question is not whether evil exists, but how it (evil) “came into the world.”<sup>27</sup> To answer this question, one will need to take a peek at African cosmogony. By *cosmogony* is meant a theory or an account of the origin of the universe. Included in this account will be an explanation of the origin of its constituent parts, such as spirits, humans, plant life, animals, the stars, nebulae, etc. Traditional African creation stories are usually steeped in myths, “out of which an ordered description of the universe (world-view, showing its origin, nature, laws and structure) may be discerned through a process of analysis.”<sup>28</sup>

In the traditional African account of reality, the world is said to have been created by a High God or supreme deity. Among the Igbo and Yoruba peoples of Nigeria, for example, this High God is called *Chukwu* and *Olodumare* respectively; other African groups call the supreme deity by different other names that I cannot detail here for want of space. Suffice it to say that *Chukwu* or *Olodumare* created other lesser deities or gods who serve as his personal assistants or messengers. The different African groups foist different myths to account for why evil exists in the world. Among the Igbo, for example, evil is said to have intruded into the world through the calamity of death. And usually too, Igbo myths blame humanity for the entrance of death into the world. There are numerous Igbo myths that try to explain how death came to be a part of human life. One such myth states that originally people did not experience death. But at a certain point in their existence, human beings sent *Nkita* (the dog) to deliver a message to *Chukwu* telling him that they were pleased with their lives of youth recrudescence. But the dog being jealous of human efforts delivered the wrong message to God saying that human beings were tired of a life of eternal boredom. *Chukwu* accepted this message, thereby allowing death and evil to intrude into the world.

Some African myths trace the origin of evil to the actions of malevolent spirits or malicious preternatural forces that are envious of human achievements. Among the Yoruba, for instance, evil is oftentimes traced to the agency of *Esu*, one of the deities in the Yoruba pantheon. *Esu* is comparable to the Devil or Satan in the Christian or Islamic religion.<sup>29</sup> However, unlike the devil of Christian account, the Yoruba depict *Esu* as possessing both malevolent and benevolent attributes. *Esu* is one of Olodumare's intermediaries, assisting him in overseeing some aspects of human affairs. *Esu* can be whimsical, visiting evil on people at will and without any apparent reason. But apart from *Esu*, many other demon spirits, principalities and powers roam the terrestrial plain, afflicting people with all forms of woes, calamities or tragedies. The Yoruba also posit the idea of *ayanmo* (destiny) to explain the occurrence of evil in people's lives. At the point of a child's conception (and by means of some unexplainable spiritual device) a person chooses his or destiny. A person who chooses a bad destiny will end up with a miserable and tragic existence eventually- same for the one who chose a good destiny.

The crucial question to ask at this point in the discussion is: has the African account of evil in resolving the quandary or dilemma of evil in the world? The answer to this question is straightforward and unequivocal, which is this; like all the other accounts on evil, the African one merely gives a pat answer to a problem that is obdurate, persistent, and intractable. In the African account, effort is made to exonerate the High God from blame for the evils and woes that afflict the world. This is the way religions generally try to deal with the problem of evil. But try as they may, religions have found it a sticky matter trying to exculpate Deity from the dilemma of evil in the world. With particular reference to the African account under consideration, it is not sufficient to assert that evil arises from human failures or due to the activities of malevolent spirits or forces that are opposed to human happiness and well-being. There still remains the dilemma of why the High God will create lesser deities that are given to evil or that are always perpetrating acts of malevolence. This aspect of the African view on evil is neither convincing nor intellectually compelling, to say the least.

### **Concluding Remarks**

As I bring the discussion in the paper to a close, I need to reiterate a point made earlier in the paper, which is that the problem of evil is an insuperable problem. It is a problem that is as old as the world itself. It is also a problem that is confounding, perplexing and befuddling. How, for instance, is it possible to justify the existence of radical evil? How is it possible to understand the suffering of the innocent? The religious answer to these questions is to say that evil reveals ‘the brilliant glory of virtue’ or that God uses suffering to refine us. However, tough-minded people decry this type of claim, regarding it rather, as a puerile explanation to a problem that is both tragic and devastating. In Christian theology, for instance, the claim is often made that God created nature free from defect, and that its present perils and hardships are punishments which humanity has brought upon itself through sin and rebellion. Evil according to this account ultimately flows from human culpability and free moral agency.

The Christian account of evil, like all other religious accounts is not without its problem. A major one is the antinomy of an infinitely benevolent deity who allowed his creatures to willfully fall into error or sin. Some commentators aver that the very idea of perfection or benevolence would neither permit nor encourage such a happening. According to this argument, “to attribute the origin of evil to the willful crime of a perfect being is thus to assert the sheer contradiction that evil has created itself *ex nihilo*.”<sup>30</sup> Traditionally, the conception of evil is usually divided into moral and physical evils. Some instances of suffering such as war and injustice, or cases of “man’s inhumanity to man,” are usually traceable to human wrongdoing, and are thus classified as *moral evils*. But other sources of anguish and pain are said to be built into the very structure of the world itself; these fall under the broad category of *physical evils*. The sources include such things as sickness and disease, earthquake and flood disasters, etc. It is on the basis of the latter, that is, physical evils that agnostics and materialists reject the idea of divine creation or the claim that the universe is governed by a benevolent deity who has the interest of his creatures at heart.

The objection to the religious explanation of the problem of evil is based on the question whether God could not have created a world in which there will be no possibility of evil or a fall. The answer given by religious people to this query is to say that suffering and evil help us to come to a better appreciation of the meaning of virtue.

“Evil,” John Hick quotes religious people as likely to say, “has crushed the human spirit as often as it has developed it; and men have collapsed before life’s challenges and opportunities as often as they have risen triumphantly to meet them.”<sup>31</sup> But does this answer resolve the problem? Does it put paid to the dilemma or the quandary of human anguish and suffering? It is doubtful if it does. So, wherein lies the solution to the riddle of evil that the paper speaks of?

In my opinion, the safest way to grapple with the problem is to admit the fact that evil is not an illusion; nor is the problem it generates a pseudo-problem. On the contrary, the problem of evil is one that crushes the human heart. But while admitting that evil is bizarre, horrible and disgusting, we will be making a hasty generalization to move from claim that evil exists in the world to the conclusion that the world is fluke or a sham. The Buddhist attitude to evil appears more germane to human practical life. In Buddhism, evil or suffering is seen as a basic factor of life; from birth to death, it is accepted as our *faithful companion* as humans: “How to face it, alleviate it, bear it, and make conducive use of it, is the concern of all developed religions.”<sup>32</sup> Indeed, as I mentioned earlier in the paper, we do not experience only evil in the world but also good.

What is shown by the above is that life is an admixture of the pleasant and the unpleasant. For example, the experiences of childbirth, recovery from sickness, success in business or education are all part of human experiences in the world. In normal life situations, it is commonplace to speak of the beauty, the harmony or the tranquility of the natural environment – meaning that apart from the negative experiences of life, there exists as well, those experiences that are positive and vivifying. The great question is: if the negative events in life show that the world is pointless and ineligible, what do the positive experiences show? That the world is eligible and purposeful? These questions are not irrelevant; nor are they otiose and trite.

### **A Postscript**

In this paper I have not tried to downplay the problem of evil or shy away from the sense of anguish that it generates in the human heart. Evil is not an appearance as some people erroneously say. It is also not an illusion of the senses as some others suggest. Rather, it is a problem that is real, puzzling and bizarre. However, having

acknowledged the reality of problems of human anguish and suffering, what we need do as humans is to strive to mitigate these problems through positive effort and by a refusal to resign to fate. But if this prescription doesn't quite add up to, it only goes to confirm the sense of the perennity that the problem of evil poses.

---

### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>W I. Matson, *A New History of Philosophy: Modern*, vol. II (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Publishers, 1987), p. 365.

<sup>2</sup>L. Morrow "Evil," In: *Time Magazine*, June 10, 1991, p. 40.

<sup>3</sup>Albert Camus, *Caligula and Cross Purpose* (Middlesex, England: Penguin Books 1965), p. 34.

<sup>4</sup>O. H. Green, "Fear of Death," In: *Philosophical and Phenomenological Research*, vol. XLIII, no. 1, 1982, p. 101.

<sup>5</sup>John Hick, "The Problem of Evil," In: *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, vol. 3 (London: Collier-Macmillan Publishers, 1972), p. 136.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 135.

<sup>7</sup>J. M. Torre, *Christian Philosophy* (Philippines: Vera Reyes, Inc., 1981), p. 215.

<sup>8</sup>W. I. Matson, *A New History of Philosophy: Ancient and Medieval*, vol. I (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Publishers, 1986), p. 176.

<sup>9</sup>J. M. Torre, op. cit., p. 215.

<sup>10</sup>Bertrand Russell, *History of Western Philosophy* (London: George Allen and Unwin Limited), p. 480.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., p. 597.

<sup>12</sup>M. J. Walsh, *A History of Philosophy* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1985), p. 567.

<sup>13</sup>This story is as illustrative as it is ironic. It only goes to corroborate the point made already in the paper that most human beings live in the denial when it comes to confronting the issue of the evil they are faced with in their day-to-day life experiences. For more on this story see R. Abelson et al., *The Philosophical Imagination: An Introduction to Philosophy* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1977), pp. 22-23.

<sup>14</sup>R. Abelson et al., *Supra*, p.23.

<sup>15</sup>B. Z. Cooper, *The Idea of God* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1952), p. 111.

<sup>16</sup>Michael Green, *You Must Be Joking*, London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1976), p. 29.

<sup>17</sup>M. J. Walsh, op. cit., p. 497.

<sup>18</sup>J. I. Omoregbe, *A Philosophical Look at Religion* (Lagos: Joja Educational Research Publishers Limited), p. 58.

<sup>19</sup> David Hume, *Intellectual Powers*, Essay 2, Chapter 12; reprinted in W. I. Matson, *A New History of Philosophy: Modern*, vol. II, op.cit., pp. 365-567.

<sup>20</sup>David Hume, *Intellectual Powers*, Essay 2, Chapter 12.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid.

<sup>22</sup>Albert Camus, *Lyrical and Critical* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1967), p. 19.

<sup>23</sup>C. I. Glicksberg, *The Self in Modern Literature* (Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1963), p. 107.

<sup>24</sup>O. H. Green, op. cit., p. 101.

<sup>25</sup>C. I. Glicksberg, op. cit., pp. 106-107.

<sup>26</sup> It is this idea that evil cannot be “redeemed” or “dispelled” from the world that has given it this picture of intractability. It is also for this reason that the absurdist thinkers depict human beings as victims who fight in vain against evil. For more illustration on Sartre’s views on evil and the absurdity of human existence, see William Barret, “Sartre,” in Richard Kostelanetz (ed.), *On Contemporary Literature* (New York: Penguin Books, 1958), pp. 536-63.

<sup>27</sup>E. I. Metuh, *God and Man in African Religion: A Case Study of the Igbo of Nigeria*, (Enugu: Snaap Press Limited, 1999), p. 38.

<sup>28</sup>T. U. Nwala, *Igbo Philosophy* (Lagos: Lantern Books, 1985), p. 28.

<sup>29</sup> Yoruba scholars are at pains to show that *Esu* is different from the devil or Satan of the New Testament account in the Bible. For example, Bolaji Idowu equates him with the Satan of the Book of Job, who he regards as “one of the ministers of God, and [who] has the office of trying men’s sincerity and putting their religion to the proof.” The problem with this account is that not many Christians will accept the claim that the Satan said to be responsible for the woes that befell Job was “a minister of God.” Cf. E. B. Idowu, *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief* (Ibadan: Longman Nigeria Plc, 1996), pp. 80- 82; and the Bible account of Satan’s dealing with Job in the first chapter of the Book of Job.

<sup>30</sup>John Hick, op. cit., p. 138.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., p. 139.

<sup>32</sup>I. Schloegl, “Suffering in Zen Buddhism,” In: *Theoria to Theory: An International Journal of Science, Philosophy and Contemplative Religion*, vol. II, No. 3, 1977, p. 217.

---

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**

- Abelson, R. et al., *The Philosophical Imagination*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1977.
- Camus, A., *Caligula and Cross Purpose*, Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1965.
- Camus, A., *Lyrical and Critical*, London: Hamish Hamilton, 1967.
- Cooper, B.Z., *The Idea of God*, The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1952.
- Glicksberg, C. I., *The Self in Modern Literature*, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1963.
- Green, M., *You Must Be Joking*, London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1976.
- Green, O. H., "Fear of Death," in *Philosophical and Phenomenological Research*, vol. XLIII, no. 1, 1982.
- Hick, J., "The Problem of Evil," in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, vol. 3; London: Collier-Macmillan Publishers, 1972.
- Hume, D., *Intellectual Powers*, Essay 2, Chapter 12; quoted in Matson, W. I., *A New History of Philosophy: Modern*, vol. II, New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Publishers, 1987.
- Idowu, E. B., *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief*, Ibadan: Longman Nigeria Plc, 1996.
- Matson, W. I., *A New History of Philosophy: Ancient and Medieval*, vol. I, New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Publishers, 1986.
- Matson, W. I., *A New History of Philosophy: Modern*, vol. II, New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Publishers, 1987.
- Metuh, E. I., *God and Man in African Religion: A Case Study of the Igbo of Nigeria*, Enugu: Snaap Press Limited, 1999.
- Morrow, L., "Evil," in *Time Magazine*, June 10, 1991.
- Nwala, T. U., *Igbo Philosophy*, Lagos: Lantern Books, 1985.

Omeregbe, J. I., *A Philosophical Look at Religion*, Lagos: Joja Educational Research Publishers Limited, 1993.

Russell, B., *History of Western Philosophy*, London: George Allen and Unwin Limited, 1948.

Torre J. M., *Christian Philosophy*, Philippines: Vera Reyes, Inc., 1981.

Schloegl, I., "Suffering in Zen Buddhism," in *Theoria to Theory: An International Journal of Science, Philosophy and Contemplative Religion*, vol. II, No. 3, 1977.

Walsh, M.J., *A History of philosophy*, London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1985.