

**THE NATURE OF EVIL AND HUMAN WICKEDNESS IN
TRADITIONAL AFRICAN THOUGHT: FURTHER REFLECTIONS
ON THE PHILOSOPHICAL PROBLEM OF EVIL**

Dr. Oladele Abiodun Balogun
Department of Philosophy
Olabisi Onabanjo University
P.M.B 2002, Ago-Iwoye
Ogun State, Nigeria

INTRODUCTION

One of the important and most discussed problems in metaphysics and contemporary philosophy of religion is the philosophical problem of evil. The problem has generated a lot of controversies and debates from scholar (philosophers, religionists, theologians, moralists, psychologists, etc.). One clear point amidst these discussions on philosophical problem of evil is that the last has neither been written nor heard. It remains an open ended issue for philosophical consideration. As a matter of fact, various solutions have been propounded by philosophers towards the resolution of problem. The philosophical problem of evil has posed a great challenge to the claims of theism.

In the efforts to combat the challenge, several responses (theodicies) have been put forward by theists among others to explain the philosophical problem of evil in an attempt to make God retains his omnipotence and omni benevolence attributes. Some of these responses are: The Augustinian response which hinges upon the concept of the fall of man from an original state of righteousness; the Irenaean response hinging upon the idea of the gradual creation of a perfected humanity through life of a highly imperfect world and the response of modern process theology, hinging, upon the idea of God who is not all powerful and not in fact able to prevent the evil arising either in human beings or in the process of nature¹.

Our concern in this paper is not to examine all the various solutions that have been postulated by theists and others in order to resolve the philosophical problem of evil, but to focus on how the nature of evil and human wickedness in traditional Yoruba

African thought can be used as an African solution to the philosophical problem of evil. It is a fact that some of the solutions postulated to resolve the puzzle entailed in the philosophical problem of evil have failed in proffering a philosophical solution to the problem. In an attempt to further reflect on the philosophical problem of evil, the paper undertakes an exposition of the nature of evil, and human wickedness in traditional Yoruba African thought with the aim of proffering better explanations towards resolving the philosophical problem of evil.

Furthermore, the paper exposes the thrust of the philosophical problem of evil bearing in mind the earlier and the contemporary reflections on the problem. In this regard, some notable solutions are discussed with notes on their short comings. More so, the paper shows that the philosophical problem of evil which is one of the oldest metaphysical problems in Western philosophy does not arise in the analysis of the nature of evil and human wickedness in traditional Yoruba African thought. The paper discovers that Africans consider evilness and goodness to be dialectical and not diametrically opposed to each other.

THE NATURE OF EVIL AND HUMAN WICKEDNESS IN TRADITIONAL YORUBA AFRICAN THOUGHT

For the sake of convenience, the analysis of the nature of evil and human wickedness in traditional African thought shall be based on the Yoruba experience. The Yoruba constitute an integral ethnic group in Nigeria, a West African Country. The Yoruba conception of the meaning of evil and human wickedness may be similar to other general meaning, but the origin, nature and source of evil to them are quite different. Generally speaking, to the Yoruba, evil means anything that is injurious, painful, hurtful or calamitous. The Yoruba word for evil, “ibi”, denotes something that is not good, that is, absence of good or the corruption of goodness. This explains why to the Yoruba, anything that impedes the achievement of goals, ideal, happiness or general well being may be regarded as a form of “ibi” (evil). For instance if a nursing mother has just lost her baby, the Yoruba would not hesitate to regard such loss as evil (ibi) because such a loss will definitely bring a form of pain or sorrow to the mother or the entire family and if such occurrence is persistent in a family, the Yoruba would exclaim “Olorun a dawo ibi

duro” (God will put an end to the evil). Furthermore, if a person has just been involved in a fatal accident that eventually led to the amputation of his/her hands or legs, such accident to the Yoruba, connotes some evil because of injurious pain that the fellow will suffer. In other words, the Yoruba see evil as a vice or a misfortune.

For the Yoruba, the existence of evil (‘ibi’) in the world is a reality or a fact that cannot be disputed. As a matter of fact, the existence of evil is not an imagination in human mind, because to them evil is as real as the existence of man in the universe. This explains why the Yoruba would say “tibi, tire la da le aye” (The world is created with both good and evil). It is instructive to note that in Yoruba thought, no woman would be congratulated for giving birth to a baby until the placenta which is translated as (ibi or ekeji omo) has come out. This amply shows that the Yoruba believe that the operation of the world is predicated on the dialectics of “goodness” (ire) and evil (ibi).

In Yoruba worldview, there are various kinds of evil. One of the evils recognized by the Yoruba is physical evil. Physical evil which comprises of all the pains and discomforts arise from diseases, accidents, or from duress upon the body like headaches, thirst, hunger and so on. To the Yoruba, while all these physical pains and physical disasters (ajalu) and calamities are regarded as form of evil, a great attention is paid to the kind of pain and affliction which are inflicted on men by men. The Yoruba strongly believe that it is possible for men to inflict pains and afflict fellow human beings. This kind of evil is what the Yoruba would refer to as human wickedness. Human wickedness is the nefarious acts perpetrated by man in order to subject his fellow man to torture and all forms of pains. People who perpetrate human wickedness are regarded as “ika eniyan” (wicked people) or onise ibi “(evil worker)”. The Yoruba believe that human wickedness which now abounds all over the world today can be performed both naturally and supernaturally. In fact, it is possible in Yoruba cultural belief for men to physically torture fellow men, that is, to afflict him and cause painful damage to his personality and character.

Also, the Yoruba believe that through the use of supernatural means it is possible for a man to inflict and afflict fellow man from afar with evil even without physical contraction. This type of spiritual wickedness is more grievous than the physical type of wickedness in that it might not be easy to trace the cause and often times, the sympathizer

may even be the cause of the evil. It is a known fact among the Yoruba that someone can summon a supernatural power to inflict another person with leprosy, blindness and even kill the fellow through the use of “apeta” (spiritual arrow). Our interest is not on the justification or the rationale behind human wickedness in traditional Yoruba thought, but to expose that the traditional Yoruba believe that evil and human wickedness are part of the operations of the world. A proper understanding of the traditional Yoruba cosmos will reveal the possibility and efficaciousness of such human wickedness. This is because the Yoruba commonly hold the idea that events in nature can have their causes traced outside of nature². This point will be expatiated better when the origin and the source of evil is discussed.

Among the Yoruba, human wickedness towards another fellow human being may be perpetrated for several reasons. It might be done to revenge an evil that was already done by another human being. Human wickedness may be pursued to punish an offender or to even test the efficacy of a supernatural power on those who doubt the potency of such power. Some people undertake the act of human wickedness in order to force others to fear them or to show that they are more powerful than others. All the above shows that man is free to some extent in Yoruba thought and as such, he can exercise his freedom or his free will to either do good or evil. This kind of attitude is also seen in the activities of some divinities like “obatala” who is believed to be responsible for creating the physically challenged people or those who are deformed. Though this may be regarded as a form of physical evil, such physically challenged people are regarded as “eni orisa” the votaries of “orisa”³.

The Yoruba also take cognizance of the existence of moral evil. Moral evil is taken to mean the forms of disorderliness and chaos that occur when one contravenes the norms of the society. The Yoruba believe in the smooth running of the society and any contravention of the moral norms on the part of the individual may result in disorderliness which is evil. Thus among the Yoruba, it is not only the contravention of moral norms that brings evil, but the repercussion of such contravention will also result in moral evil. In other words, the Yoruba believe that when one deliberately contravenes the moral norms of the society, the divinities, ancestors and other theoretical entities that are ensuring the smooth running and governance of both “aye” (earth) and “orun” (the world

beyond) give out punishment and torture to such individual which also results in moral evil. On this note, the wrath of the ancestors, “ajogun”, and other theoretical entities that is provoked by contravention of societal norms can also be regarded as form of moral evil. Usually, this kind of evil may not subside until one corrects his/her ways and renders due sacrifices and propitiation to appease the necessary gods⁴.

It is very germane to note that the Yoruba do not necessarily perceive evil and human wickedness as ends in themselves. At times, they can be used as means to an end. In other words, the Yoruba do not necessarily see evil as diametrically opposed to good, but evil is conceived in such a way that it can result in some form of goodness. It must be emphasized that the Yoruba do not make a water tight distinction between perfect goodness and absolute evilness. Unlike in the West, where nothing good can come out of evil, the Yoruba hold a form of dualism when it comes to the existence of evil and good. They Yoruba recognize the dualism in nature but does not attempt to reduce everything to one category or regard a natural feature as absolutely positive (good) or negative (evil). They know that the world is full of characters and events which can be either good or evil, though not in the Western absolute sense⁵. Rather than for the Yoruba to admit like Biblical saying “that nothing good can come out of Nazareth (which is taken to mean evil in this context)” the Yoruba admit that “inu ikoko dudu, leko funfun ti jade (out of the black pot, the housewife produces white maize pap). Metaphorically, this proverb means that while something good can come out evil, evil may also come out of good. This explain the popular Yoruba philosophic principle that says “Tibi t’ire lo jo rin” (Goodness and evil constitute an inseparable pair) and “ire wa ninu ibi”. “There is goodness in evilness”⁶.

On the origin of evil, the Yoruba do not postulate an all evil being that is solely responsible for the occurrence of evil as we have in the West or in Judeo-Christian thought. Rather, the Yoruba conceive both evil and good as arising from the activities of Olodumare (God,) his ministers (divinities) and other theoretical entities. The traditional Yoruba were struck by the mystery of the creation of life on earth, as well as termination of human of life. They were amazed by various kind of evil, both physical and moral that pervades the human universe. Thus in their bid to account for the origin of the universe and the reason for the occurrence of various events (evil inclusive), the Yoruba are of the

conclusion that a being greater than man must have created the universe and could be held responsible for all these occurrences. To the Yoruba, “Olorun” or “Olodumare” (The Yoruba High Deity) is seen as the major cause of all visible processes in the world, and the activities of the lesser gods (called orisas) constitute important secondary causes⁷. Apart from “Olodumare” whom the Yoruba believe that he is both benevolent and malevolent, the Yoruba believe in the existence of lesser gods or divinities which are also capable of doing good and evil at the same, depending on the situations and context in question. These divinities are known as the ministers of “Olodumare”; some divinities, to use a modern terminology, are ministers with portfolio, while some are without portfolio. Those with portfolio are those who perform real executive on legislative functions while the others are mere titular heads. The Yoruba do not perceive their divinities as mere illusory being, but as real spiritual beings through which people could have access to “Olodumare”⁸. Also, the Yoruba do not perceive their divinities as all good beings as some of them are also responsible for some evils that exist in the world. A cursory look at the Yoruba conception of higher god will seem to suggest that he is a being akin in nature to the Christian idea of a supreme being who is all powerful and absolute in his actions and conducts. Also, since “Olodumare” is called “Eleda” the creator of all things, the temptation is there to think that he did everything unilaterally without consulting any other being or divinity. However, on a deeper reflection, one will realize that unlike the Christian God, the Yoruba God works together with other divinities to ensure the smooth running of the universe by creating both good and evil. Thus we can see that there is a sort of harmonious interaction between the African God and his minister (that is co workers) in being responsible for both good and bad. Talking about African idea of God .G.S Sogolo has this to say:

He knows more than we do, but unlike Christian God he does not know everything. He is more powerful than we are, but He is not all powerful. God in Africa is more benevolent than we are, but He too can do evil and therefore not omni-benevolent. In short God in African Religion is not transcendental⁹.

Here, it must be pointed out that any attempt to depict the African God as possessing similar attributes with the Christian God will amount to making a big mistake. Any

attempt to depict, the Yoruba God as a being who is omnipotent, omni-benevolent or omni-science will amount to nothing but a super imposition of the alien criteria on the African God, or in the words of Okot, P'Bitek "simply to robe our deities with Hellenic garments"¹⁰.

The Yoruba never regard their God and divinities as perfect beings that cannot do evil. As a matter of fact, apart from the fact that they recognize that their gods can make mistakes, they are also responsible for the occurrence of evil in the universe. For instance, "obatala", one of the divinities is the sculptor divinity who has the prerogative to create things as he chooses, so that he makes man of either shapely or deformed features. The hunchbacks, the cripple, the albino (which are regarded as forms of evil) are special marks of his authority either signifying his displeasure for the breach of some taboos or evidence of his capacity to do, as he likes. While the postulation of "obatala" as the main causal factor that accounts for evil like the physical deformity of some human beings is highly commendable, however, one notices a tinge of arbitrariness in the way "obatala" used his divine power to create some people objects of scorn and pity. One would have thought that those who breached the celestial taboos would merely receive corrective punishment rather than being made scapegoats or spectacles of divine displeasure. The fact that "Obatala" is able to make some people deformed also confirms that as a divinity, he is a little more powerful than man, but not all powerful since he too is liable to making mistakes. The votaries of the "orisa" (eni orisa) are clear cases of errors arising from divine mistakes¹¹. Sophie Oluwole captures the above point better when she opines:

Instead of trying to deny the existence of evil as many western thinkers have done, the Yoruba sage neither regards God as the creator of the world nor as a perfect being. The Yoruba God asks some questions and acknowledges the place of a new knowledge¹².

The above excerpts by Oluwole further corroborates the earlier ascertainment made by Sogolo that the Yoruba God is not omniscient, since he asks questions and always ready to learn. Furthermore, it should be pointed out that Ajala, the maker of destiny in Yoruba myth of creation can be taken as the agent indirectly responsible for evil, that is, human

suffering and not God. Ajala in that myth is an incorrigible debtor and an irresponsible man. It is on this account that Oluwole contends that:

The Yoruba thinker recognizes evil as real, but he does not regard its existence as proof of God's incompetence or His limited goodness, since He is not conceived as absolute in any of these sense in the first instance¹³.

Another divinity that is always being associated with evil is known as "Esu". While it is true that "Esu" is capable of doing evil, it will be totally incorrect to perceive "Esu" as an all-evil being like 'Satan' of Judeo-Christian thought. The position of "Esu" among the divinities in Yoruba thought cannot be undermined in that he supervises and enforces the norms and rules on earth. In the Yoruba cosmological account of creation, "Esu" is known to be one of the three primordial divinities which had always coexisted with "Olodumare", (the Yoruba high deity) as a minister in the theocratic governance of the universe. The other two divinities are "Ifa" and "Obatala".

"Esu" is regarded as the special relation officer between heaven and earth. He is being called the inspector general of police or universal police who reports regularly to "Olodumare" on the deeds of other divinities and men. In this sense, some scholars think that "Esu" of the traditional Yoruba thought is similar to the description given to Satan in the old testament book of Job. Though, scholars like, N.A Fadipe, P.A. Dopomu, J.O. Lucas, contended that 'Esu' is malevolent in his intent and purposes, therefore he is the same as biblical Satan or devil, yet there are other scholars like Kola Abimbola, J.A.I. Bewaji who disputed the above claim and argue that 'Esu' as well could be benevolent, since he is capable of doing good, he cannot be equated with biblical Satan, especially Satan of the new testament¹⁴.

In the words of Kola Abimbola, "Esu" is not all evil-being. He is a neutral element in the sense that he is neither good nor bad. He is simply the mediator between all the entities and forces on both sides of the right and left divide¹⁵. To the Yoruba, "Esu" has the ability to make the sacrifices offered to "Olodumare" to be unacceptable. This suggests that "Esu" can alter or work in favour of any man depending on the consideration given to him along the line. This explains why it is always advised that whenever sacrifices are offered, the portion of "Esu" must be set aside.

The point in the above is therefore that care must be taken not to confuse “Esu” in Yoruba thought with the biblical Satan. Ordinarily, a Yoruba man with Christian orientations is likely to interpret the biblical Satan to mean “Esu”. But this will be wrong because unlike the biblical Satan who is an all-evil personality through and through, “Esu” is not all together evil, but also has the ability to do good since to the Yoruba, good in itself is not diametrically opposed to evil. Awolalu captures this when he asserts:

What is intriguing about ‘Esu’ is that he does not discriminate in carrying out errands; good as well as evil. He can be used as an instrument of retaliation, he can create enmity between father and children or between husband and wife, as he can do between two good friends. At the same time, he can provide children for the barren or good bargaining power for market women . . . we see ‘Esu’ as a personification of good and evil¹⁶.

Again, unlike Satan, “Esu” is not a rival of “Olodumare” but works in harmony with him to ensure peace and order in the universe. This explains why the Yoruba have no qualms being identified with “Esu”. The benevolence of “Esu” is also manifested in his veneration. “Esu” is worshipped by some Yoruba because they have faith in its protective and benevolent capacities¹⁷. It is not uncommon to find Yoruba names prefixed with the word “Esu” such as Esufunke (Esu has made me tender), Esugbemi (Esu has prospered me) etc.

A lot of attention has been given to “Esu” just to show that while he may be held responsible for the occurrence of some evil just as “Obatala” too, he is still capable of doing good. In other words, he has the ability to do good and evil. As a matter of fact, when human beings want to perpetrate evil against other human beings who are regarded as enemies, “Esu” can also be employed as instrument to wreck havoc and cause troubles. Bolaji Idowu also recognizes that “Esu” is not the only divinity that is associated with evil. In supporting the above argument, he opines:

There is an unmistakable elements of evil in ‘Esu’, and for that reason, he has been predominantly associated with evil things. There are those who say that the primary function of ‘Esu’ in this world is to spoil things. But even so we cannot call him the devil . . . what element of ‘evil’ there is in ‘Esu’ can be found also to some degree in most of other divinities¹⁸.

There are other divinities too that are also capable of doing evil apart from “Esu” which also show that in Yoruba thought, no single entity can be held responsible for the occurrence of evil in Yoruba thought, “Sango” is regarded as the god of thunder and lightening. The manifestation of his wrath is also being regarded as form of evil among humans. “Sango” is in charge of the moral aspects of human life and ensures strict adherence to God’s law. “Saponna”, the god of small pox also has the ability to do evil. In his capacity as a moral exemplar, he helps in carrying out “Olodumare” moral sanctions and torments whoever breaks the laws of “Olodumare” with small pox.

The occurrence of evil in Yoruba thought is also attributed to the other supernatural forces apart from the above mentioned. According to Kola Abimbola, the Yoruba cosmos is divided into two halves, the right hand and the left hand¹⁹. While about 400 primordial powers occupy the right, about 200 primordial powers occupy the left. To Abimbola, the power on the right hand side are known as “Orisas”, while the power on the left hand are known as Ajogun (the anti-gods)²⁰. While it is instructive to know that the powers (orisas) on the right are benevolent, they are also capable of doing evil in that they sometimes punish humans who corrupt society. Also, the powers on the left side are irredeemably malevolent²¹. Therefore, both the “Ajoguns”, (the powers on the left) and “Orisas” (the powers on the right) are capable of causing evil on the universe.

Furthermore, it must be noted that there are two supernatural forces that straddle both side of the left/right divide. According to Abimbola, these are “Aje” (who are usually improperly translated as witches) and “Esu” (the universal police)²². It is explained further by Abimbola that unlike “Esu” who is neutral, the “Aje” are the allies of the powers on the left (the Ajoguns)²³. The “Aje” have the abilities to suck human blood, eat human flesh and they can afflict humans with various types of diseases. Even though the “Aje” are capable of doing evil and inflict affliction on human being, sometimes, they are also benevolent in that they can protect or bless particular individuals by making them rich and successful²⁴.

In order to recapitulate what has been said so far in our discussion on the nature of evil and human wickedness in traditional Yoruba African thought, the following points are pertinent of note:

- a. The Yoruba do not deny the existence of evil and they do not believe in using superfluous arguments to counter the existence of evil.
- b. The Yoruba believe that goodness and evilness are dialectical and not diametrical opposed to each other. Kola Abimbola captures this when he opines:

In fact, Yoruba theology suggests that there can be no such thing as perfectly good world unless we understand the meaning of evil. So the “Ajogun” and other evil forces that populate the Yoruba cosmos are necessary for understanding and appreciating the value of good²⁵.

- c. Unlike Judeo-Christian thought, no single entity can be held responsible for the occurrence of evil. In other word, in Yoruba thought, evil does not emanate from one source, while “Olodumare”, “Esu” and other powers on the right to use Abimbola’s Phrase are also capable of doing evil, it is generally believed that evil emanates from the evil supernatural forces called “Ajogun”, that is, the powers on the left. This point is given further expression by Abimbola when he asserts that:

These forces (Ajogun) are all separate and distinct entities and as such they are individually responsible for a specific type of evil. The Ajogun have eight warlords: Iku (Death), Arun (disease), Ofo (Loss), Egba (Paralysis), Oran (Trouble), Epe (Curse), Ewon (Imprisonment), Ese (Afflictions)²⁶.

To sum up the above explanation of Abimbola, while the Yoruba have poly-demonic conception of evil, the Christians have a mono-demonic conception of evil²⁷.

- d. “Esu” of the Yoruba is not diametrically opposed to “Olodumare” (the Yoruba high deity) as we have it in Judeo-Christian thought where Satan, all evil being is diametrically opposed to God.
- e. The attributes of “Olodumare” (the Yoruba high deity) are actually different from the attributes of the Christian God. While there is no trace of evil in the Christian God who is omni-benevolent, omniscience and omnipotent, the Yoruba high deity can both be benevolent and malevolent.

- f. There is no bridgeable gap between the realm of the natural and the supernatural in Yoruba thought. This makes it easier for man to communicate easily with realm of supernatural in order to inflict pain and evil on fellow human being.

TRADITIONAL AND CONTEMPORARY REFLECTIONS ON THE PHILOSOPHICAL PROBLEM OF EVIL

The philosophical problem of evil arose in an attempt to reconcile the good, loving and powerful creator, God with the reality of the existence of evil. Theists have always portrayed God to be omni-benevolent, omnipotent and omniscient, however, the existence of evil tend to strip a good God of those attributes. According to John Hick, as a challenge to theism, the problem of evil has traditionally been posed in the form of a dilemma: if God is perfect loving, God must wish to abolish all evil. But evil exists; therefore God cannot be both omnipotent and perfectly loving²⁸. In another form, Epicurus presented the problem of evil in the following way:

Is God willing to prevent evil, but not able to prevent evil?
Then He is not omnipotent. Is God able to prevent evil, but not willing to prevent evil? Then He is not omni-benevolent. Is God both willing and able to prevent evil? Then, why does evil exist?²⁹.

The same philosophical problem of evil is also presented by Hume as follows:

If evil in the world is the intention of the deity, then he is not benevolent. If evil in the world is contrary to his intentions, then he is not omnipotent. But evil is either in accordance with his intentions or contrary to it. Therefore, either the deity is not benevolent or is not omnipotent³⁰.

The philosophical problem of evil is a serious problem that calls for reflection in that theologians or theists are not ready to compromise the attributes of God as all loving, all powerful and all merciful, yet the reality of evil keeps on increasing everyday as human beings are being attacked by poverty, deadly diseases and various form of evil. The experience of pains and sufferings on the part of man usually generate thoughts and puzzles that cast doubt on whether God actually possesses these attributes as being claimed by theologians. Theologians and theists believe that God is the central focus of their religion and this God must be seen as all good-God which has no trace of evil and

He is not capable of doing evil. This good and loving God always conceive anything good and does well all the time to those who believe him. In spite of this, it still baffles people how come evil has ravaged the whole world without the loving God and powerful God doing something concrete about it.

Right from the inception of the theistic philosophical problem of evil, several solutions have been proffered by theists and several scholars towards the resolution of the problem. For instance, J.L Mackie believes that the denial of two of the attributes of theistic God will bring about the solution to the problem. He argues:

If one is prepared to say that God is not perfectly good, or not quite omnipotent or that evil does not exist or that good is not opposed to the kind of evil that exists or there are limits to what an omnipotent God can do, the problem of evil will not arise for you³¹.

As good as the solution proffered by J.L Mackie may be, theologians are not ready to deny any of the attributes of God, and rather, they are looking for ways to discard the reality of the existence of evil. As they are busy looking for ways to discard the existence of evil, the reality of evil keeps on challenging the omnipotence of a good God. Another way of resolving the problem as postulated by the Contemporary Christian Scientists is to say that evil is an illusion of human mind which cannot be validated by human experience. It is true that the above statement is far from truth as the reality of evil is clear, evident and can be validated by human experiences. John Hick captures this when he explains that there can be no doubt, then, for biblical faith, evil is entirely real and in no sense an illusion³².

Some theologians have also used the free will argument to justify the existence of evil and retain the uncompromising attributes of God. Their argument is that God created man as a freewill agent who is free to choose that which is right or wrong, unfortunately, in most cases, man has always used his freewill to act wrongly and through the act of wrongdoing, man has brought evil to the world, hence God cannot be blamed for such evil. This kind of defense is not strong enough to resolve the puzzle of the philosophical problem of evil because theists have been challenged that it should not be a problem for an omnipotent God to create people who would be genuinely free who could at the same time be guaranteed always to act rightly. In other words, the antagonists of this position believe that

God is still limited, if He is unable to create a free human being who will not choose to commit sins all the time as against doing good.

There are litanies of theodicies to justify the goodness and the omnipotence of God in the face of evil. While the paper is not committed to discussing various forms of theodicies that have been put forward by theologians like Augustine, Leibniz and St. Irenaeus³³, it might be of utmost importance to point out that all these theodices have failed in resolving the philosophical problem of evil. Theodicy is an attempt to vindicate the goodness and justice of God in ordaining or allowing moral and physical evil and human suffering; the attempt to make God's omnipotence and omni-benevolence compatible with the existence of evil and also to defend the belief that this is the best of all possible worlds³⁴. To analytical minds, this world cannot be regarded as the best of all possible worlds because of the volume of evil inherent in it. Igboin Benson puts it better when he claims, God could not create such an imperfect world and still retain it as the best possible as theologians would want us to believe³⁵. Bertrand Russell was embittered about this imperfect world and asserts God deserves no handshake for leaving the world as it is after millions of years of trial and error³⁶. Rejecting theodicy as a form of defense for reconciling the attributes of God with the reality of evil, Arthur Schopenhauer writes: This world is rather the worst of possible worlds and that consequently we are not justified in concluding that God exists or that the world with all its evil is the creation of a good God³⁷.

The most popular attempt to deal with the problem of evil in Christianity, according to J.A.I Bewaji consists in saying that Lucifer, or Devil who was formerly God's deputy is the cause or the originator of all evils in the universe³⁸. In other words, Devil is an all evil being who is responsible for the occurrence of evil in the world. This kind of response only begs the question rather than resolving it. Bewaji realizes this as he quickly points out:

Persuasive and simple as this (argument) seems, it cannot escape obvious objections or at least rejoinders. If God had been all knowing and all good, He would not have created Satan or Lucifer. If par impossible, He did create Satan in error, then it should not have been too difficult for him to rectify the error and improve or destroy Satan, unless, he is not, contra hypothesis, all powerful³⁹.

From the above discussions, it is glaring that the reality of evil creates a problem for the theist. There are a number of simple solutions available for a theist who desires seriously to modify his theism; only if he sincerely wants this problem to be resolved. He can either admit a limit to God's power or He can deny God's moral perfection or He can claim that God created only the good in the universe and that some other power created evil. Unfortunately, since theists are not ready to accept any of the above options, it has opened theism to various criticisms and left the problem of evil to become insoluble. There is no way to avoid the problem because it is right here with us. G.H Joyce writes that:

The existence of evil in the world must at all times be the greatest of all problems which the mind encounters when he reflects on God and his relation to the world. If God is indeed, all good and all powerful, how has evil any place in the world which He has made? Whence come it? Why is here? If he is all good why did he allow it to arise? All powerful, why does He not deliver us from the burdens? Alike in the physical and moral order creation seems so grievously maimed that we find it hard to understand how evil can derive in its entirety from God⁴⁰.

I think the philosophical problem of evil has stubbornly resisted the best of Western philosophical efforts towards being solved, in the same vein, I think it is high time to turn into African philosophical thought in search for a solution to the ageing philosophical problem of evil.

THE YORUBA CONCEPT OF EVIL AND THE PHILOSOPHICAL PROBLEM OF EVIL

It is an indisputable fact that going through our analysis of the nature of evil and human wickedness in traditional Yoruba thought, such analysis can be used as an African solution to the philosophical problem of evil which is one of the oldest metaphysical problems in Western philosophy that has defied solutions. Having established that the Yoruba cosmological belief on the nature of evil and human wickedness and the attributes of "Olodumare" (Yoruba High Deity) and other divinities are neither problematic nor contradictory with the reality of evil and human wickedness in the world, then it would be easy to understand that the theistic problem of evil does not exist in Yoruba thought. This is because in the first instance, the Yoruba do not deny or pretend that evil is an illusion in the

world. They are quite aware that evil exists and reality cannot be denied or doubted. This is also coupled with their belief that their God (Olodumare) is not a supreme being like the Christian God.

To the Yoruba, “Olodumare” which is better interpreted as the high deity does not work alone, without the support of other divinities; they jointly created every thing that exists in the universe. Thus, it is not possible for such high deity to possess the absolute attribute of all-loving, all-knowing, all-powerful, all-merciful that led to the philosophical problem of evil, when such attributes come face to face with the reality of evil.

To the Yoruba, there is no embarrassment that will be caused when such attributes are not associated with the high deity or other divinities. None of the Yoruba scriptures postulates or ascribes such attributes to “Olodumare” and his divinities.

Also, the Yoruba strongly believe that evilness is not diametrically opposed to goodness in the world; it is their conviction that the two are inseparable pair which are necessary for the smooth running and understanding of various events in the universe. Thus, the question of whether God has the power to overcome evil, but He is not willing, or is He willing, but He does not have the power, does not even arise in the first instance. The problem created by theologians with their over-ambitious task to discredit the African gods in an attempt to propagate their gospel or missionary news actually led them into deeper problem, which up till today; they are still looking for solutions. Ordinarily, one would have expected theists to soft pedal on the attributes of God in an attempt to easily discard the philosophical problem of evil, but they are not ready to uphold such position because it will reveal the weakness of their God which they claim He is all-strong and all-powerful to easily overthrow the African gods.

From whatever angle, the issue is approached, since the nature of evil and human wickedness in traditional Yoruba thought shows that the Yoruba do not postulate a single entity or a single source as the source evil, that is, since the Yoruba have the poly-demonic conception of evil, as against the mono-demonic conception of evil, it is glaring that “Esu” of the Yoruba thought is not absolutely opposed to “Olodumare”, the high deity. The antecedents conditions that led to the philosophical problem of evil were not present in Yoruba traditional thought. The high deity, divinities, “Ajogun”, “Aje” and even human beings have the potential of doing good and evil whenever the need arises

and evil is never conceived by the traditional Yoruba as something that is inimical to the goal and power of gods. It is of utmost importance to note that the traditional Yoruba do not need any form of struggle or theodicy to defend their high deity and divinities because their conception, nature and the source of evil and human wickedness are so clearly conceptualized without any form of ambiguity and vagueness. The various kinds of evil that exist are easily taken care of by the role and activities of the “Ajogun”. Thus, it would not be an overstatement to assert that the philosophical problem of evil is a mirage in traditional Yoruba African thought or better still, the Yoruba conception of evil and human wickedness is more rational and better understood than the Western conception of evil.

Be that as it may, it is important to mention that because of the interaction of the contemporary Yoruba with the Western idea of God through Christianity, there are so many Western trained scholars who have misinterpreted the Yoruba conception of evil and human wickedness. Some of them have super imposed the Western attributes of God on the Yoruba high deity. One is not surprised that even the likes of Bolaji Idowu still fall into this kind of conceptual error. It is the position of this paper that the time has come for the contemporary Africans to rid their beliefs system from all sorts of distortions and modifications, so that the true picture and analysis of the African beliefs system can be known to the younger and incoming generations. It is on this note that I want to join the crusades being propagated by philosophers like Kola Abimbola, J.A.I Bewaji, Kwasi Wiredu and others in an attempt to give clearer explanations and understanding to African belief systems.

CONCLUSION

It is pertinent to end that a proper understanding of the nature of evil and human wickedness in traditional Yoruba thought will no doubt reveal that such analysis has several advantages over the Western Christian conception of the nature of evil. Apart from the fact that the traditional Yoruba conception of evil does not give room for philosophical problem of evil, it also has the advantage of helping to maintain orderliness and moral uprightness in the universe. In the traditional Yoruba cosmos, crimes were greatly reduced as every one was aware that there is an instant punishment in form of evil awaiting those

who corrupt the society. Conclusively, while I do not pretend that there are no problems associated with the nature of evil and human wickedness in Yoruba thought which is beyond the scope of this paper, the truth is that such problem is not the kind that is embedded in the philosophical problem of evil.

ENDNOTES

1. John, Hick. *Philosophy of Religion*. California: Prentice Hall of India, 1992, p.40.
2. Oladele, Balogun. "A Comparative Study of Causality in Western Science and Traditional African Thought". A PhD Thesis, Department of Philosophy, University of Ibadan, 2004, p. 24.
3. J.O. Awolalu and P.A. Dopamu, *West African Traditional Religion*. Ibadan: Onibonoje Press, 1979, pp.78-79.
4. *Ibid.*
5. Sophie, Oluwole. "Madonna and The Whore in African Traditional Thought". *Journal of Philosophy and Development*, no 1, vol 1 & 2, January, (1995): 18.
6. *Ibid*, p.19.
7. J.O. Sodipo. "Notes on the Concept of Cause and chance in Yoruba Traditional Thought". *Second Order: An African Journal of philosophy*. vol II, No2, July (1973):15.
8. Bolaji, Idowu. *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief*. London: Longman, 1962, p.63.
9. Godwin, Sologo. *Foundations of African Philosophy: A Definitive Analysis of Conceptual issues in African Thought*. Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 1983, p.41.
10. Okot, P'Bitek. *African Religions in Western Scholarship*. Kampala: East African Literature Bureas, 1970, pp 46-69.
11. Oladele, Balogun. *Op.cit*, p 114.
12. Sophie, Oluwole. *Op cit.*, p.20.
13. *Ibid.*, p.20.

14. For more details, see: N.A Fadipe. *The sociology of the Yoruba*. Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 1970, pp 150-151. Kola, Abimbola. *Yoruba Culture: A philosophical Account*. Birmingham: Iroko Academic Publishers, 2006. J.A.I. Bewaji. "Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief and the Theistic problem of evil," *African Studies Quarterly*. Vol 6, No 1, 2006.
15. Kola, Abimbola. *Op.cit.*, P.48.
16. J.O. Awolalu and P.A. Dopamu, *Op.cit.*, p.25.
17. Bolaji, Idowu. *Op.cit.*, p.81.
18. *Ibid.*, p.83.
19. Kola, Abimbola. *Op cit.*, p.49.
20. *Ibid.*,
21. *Ibid.*,
22. *Ibid.*,
23. *Ibid.*, p.50
24. *Ibid.*
25. *Ibid.*, p.75.
26. *Ibid.*
27. The original usage of the word poly-demonic conception and mono-demonic conception is Associated with Kola Abimbola. *Ibid.*
28. John,Hick. *Op.cit.*, pp 41-42.
29. Culled from John,Hick. *Evil and the God of Love*. London: Fontana Library, 1966, p.5.
30. The quotation from Hume is culled from: Emmanuel, Ogunyemi. *The Philosophy of Religion*. Ibadan: Onibonoje, 1985, p.200.
31. J.L. Mackie. "Evil and Omnipotence". In *The Philosophy of Religion*, ed. B. Mitchel (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), p.97.
32. John, Hick. 1992, *op. cit.*, p.42.

33. For Full details on the discussions on theodicies. See John, Hick. *Ibid*, 42-50.
34. Emmanuel, Ogunyemi. *Op.cit.*, p.207.
35. Igboin, Benson. “An African Reflection on the Best possible world”. In *Philosophy and Africa*, ed. Ike Odimegwu (Amawbia: Lumos, 2006), p.250.
36. Bertrand, Russell. *Why I am not a Christian*. London: George & Allen Unwin, 1957, p.32.
37. Culled from F.A. Akinseye, “The Problem of Evil: Philosophical and Religious Approaches” In. *God: The Contemporary Discussion*, eds. P A Dopamu et al (Ago-Iwoye: NASR, 2005), p. 385.
38. J.A .I Bewaji. *Op. cit.*, p.6.
39. *Ibid*.
40. Culled from Emmanuel, Ogunyemi. *Op. cit.*, p.207.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Abimbola, Kola (2006) *Yoruba Culture: A philosophical Account*. Birmingham: Iroko Academic Publishers.
- Akinseye, F.A. (2005) “The Problem of Evil: Philosophical and Religious Approaches” In. *God: The Contemporary Discussion*, eds. P A Dopamu (et al) Ago-Iwoye: NASR.
- Awolalu, J.O. and P.A. Dopamu (1979) *West African Traditional Religion*. Ibadan: Onibonoje Press.
- Balogun, Oladele (2004) *A Comparative Study of Causality in Western Science and Traditional African Thought*”. A PhD Thesis, Department of Philosophy, University of Ibadan.
- Benson, Igboin (2006) “An African Reflection on the Best possible world”. In *Philosophy and Africa*, Ike Odimegwu (ed.) Amawbia: Lumos.
- Bewaji, J.A.I. (2006) “Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief and the Theistic Problem of Evil,” *African Studies Quarterly*. Vol 6, No 1.

- Fadipe, N.A (1970) *The sociology of the Yoruba*. Ibadan: Ibadan University Press.
- Hick, John (1966) *Evil and the God of Love*. London: Fontana Library.
- Hick, John (1992) *Philosophy of Religion*. California: Prentice Hall of India.
- Idowu, Bolaji, (1962) *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief*. London: Longman.
- Mackie, J.L. (1971) "Evil and Omnipotence". In *The Philosophy of Religion*, B. Mitchel (ed.) Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Oluwole, Sophie (1995) "Madonna and The Whore in African Traditional Thought". *Journal of Philosophy and Development*. No. 1, Vol. 1 & 2.
- Ogunyemi, Emmanuel (1985) *The Philosophy of Religion*. Ibadan: Onibonoje.
- P'Bitek, Okot (1970) *African Religions in Western Scholarship*. Kampala: East African Literature Bureaus.
- Sodipo, J.O. (1973) "Notes on the Concept of Cause and chance in Yoruba Traditional Thought". *Second Order: An African Journal of philosophy*. Vol. II, No2.
- Sologo, Godwin (1983) *Foundations of African Philosophy: A Definitive Analysis of Conceptual issues in African Thought*. Ibadan: Ibadan University Press.
- Russell, Bertrand (1957) *Why I am not a Christian*. London: George & Allen Unwin.