An Existential Interpretation of Evil: A Critique of Ẹbùn Odùwọlé and Kazeem Fáyémí on the Philosophical Problem of Evil in Yorùbá Thought

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Abstract: The problem of evil is a perennial issue in metaphysics, philosophy of religion and theology. In Yorùbá thought, it has been approached, appraised, and conceptualised by scholars from different perspectives, usually in the form of thesis and antithesis. For instance, Ẹbùn Odùwọlé and Kazeem Fáyémí disagree on whether or not the problem arises in Yorùbá thought and on its nature or formulation, if it does. Relying on the Western logical formulation of the problem, Odùwọlé maintains that the problem of evil arises in Yorùbá thought exactly like it does in Western thought; hence, for her, the problem of evil is universal. Against this view, Fáyémí contends that the philosophical problem of evil does not arise at all in Yorùbá thought; hence, the problem, according to him, is not universal. Employing the methods of critical exposition and analysis, however, I maintain a position different from those of the two scholars mentioned. I contend, on the one hand, that the existence of the philosophical problem of evil in Yorùbá thought does not necessarily imply the logical formulation of the problem as we have in the West. On the other hand, however, I maintain that the absence of the logical formulation of the problem of evil in Yorùbá thought does not directly imply the absence of the philosophical problem of evil in it. I therefore approach the interpretation of the philosophical problem of evil in Yorùbá thought from an existentialist perspective, drawing insights from some relevant verses of Òṣù.

Keywords: philosophical problem of evil, Yorùbá thought, Ẹbùn Odùwọlé, Kazeem Fáyémí, existential problem of evil

Introduction

A lthough it has been addressed from different intellectual perspectives and cultural civilisations, the problem of evil still awaits a solution (see Ogundele & Ogunyomi 34). There is a plethora of literature expressing diverse perspectives on the problem of evil in Yorùbá thought.¹ However, this paper focuses on the controversies surrounding the philosophical problem of evil in Yorùbá thought. Special attention is devoted to the contention between Ẹbùn Odùwọlé and Kazeem Fáyémí on this problem. Odùwọlé contends that the attributes of Olódùmarè and the Judeo-Christian God are similar, thereby giving rise to the logical problem of evil, which upholds the incompatibility thesis. However, Fáyémí contends that the attributes of Olódùmarè and the Judeo-Christian God are not the same, which, for him, makes Odùwọlé’s incompatibility thesis untenable and, philosophically, makes evil a non-problem in Yorùbá thought. Accordingly, Fáyémí submits that the philosophical problem of evil does not arise in Yorùbá thought.

Journal of Comparative Literature and Aesthetics Vol. 47, No. 1, Spring 2024 [87-101]
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Nevertheless, while Odúwolé could be said to have expressed a correct view by maintaining that the problem of evil arises in Yorùbá thought, she misses the point by claiming that it has a logical formulation and that Olódùmarè and the Judeo-Christian God share the same attributes—a view which pressurises the problem of incompatibility.

Again, while Fáyémi’s view that the attributes of Olódùmarè do not give rise to contradiction, thereby making the incompatibility thesis a non-issue in Yorùbá thought, could be said to be correct, his view that the _philosophical problem of evil_ does not arise altogether in Yorùbá thought, is philosophically questionable. Fáyémi seems to have based the latter submission on the logical formulation of the problem of evil, which was raised in the form of a dilemma by Epicurus and subsequently advanced by incompatibilists of various shades like John L. Mackie (‘Evil and Omnipotence’), H. J. McCloskey ( _God and Evil_ ), and the rest of them.

However, the logical formulation of the problem of evil is just one out of the numerous _philosophical_ formulations of the problem of evil. For instance, there are Manichean, Evidentialist, Existentialist, Buddhist, and Stoic formulations of the problem of evil, and they are as philosophical as the logical formulation of the problem. I argue, therefore, in this paper that the presence of the philosophical problem of evil in Yorùbá thought does not necessarily imply the logical formulation and the absence of the logical problem of evil does not necessarily imply the absence of the _philosophical_ problem of evil in Yorùbá thought. Accordingly, I take an existentialist perspective to explain the problem of evil in Yorùbá thought and contend that if the logical problem of evil does not arise, the existential problem of evil arises.

The problem of evil in Yorùbá thought: contentions and (mis)conceptions

The Yorùbá word for evil is _Ibi_, while the word for good is _Ire_. The former (_Ibi_) hinders the happiness and well-being of human beings. It is, therefore, believed to be negative. However, the latter (_Ire_) engenders and enhances the well-being of human beings. Hence, it is believed to be positive. There are different explanations for the reality of evil in the Yorùbá thought system, and those explanations have been explored in one way or another by various scholars who have written from the cultural, religious, or philosophical perspective on the problem of evil in Yorùbá thought. While some scholars stick to the concepts of destination, predestination, determination, fatality and so on to explain the reality of evil in the world ( _Oràngún_ 22–39), some attribute the existence of evil to the activities of _Ẹ̀ṣù_, one of the vital ministers of the Yorùbá God, Olódùmarè (see Dọpamu 103).

In addition, some have argued that evil in the Yorùbá thought system is directly from Olódùmarè and, by extension, that Olódùmarè possesses similar attributes (if not the same) to the Judeo-Christian God, which makes the reality of evil contradictory to the nature of Olódùmarè ( _Odùwolé_ 1–13). Furthermore, some have argued that evil results from the freedom and wickedness of human beings (A. O. Balogun). Moreover, some attribute the reality of evil to the activities of some malevolent forces like witches or _Ajogun_ (warriors against humans), who are believed to be directly opposed to the benevolent deities and are perceived as eternal enemies of human beings ( _Abímbòlọ̀, Sixteen Great Poems of Ifá_ ). Further still, some have argued that although the Yorùbá are aware of evil, the philosophical problem of evil does not arise at all in the Yorùbá thought system because evil is believed to co-exist _necessarily_ with good.

While the above views are fundamental to my discussion of the Yorùbá perspective on the problem of evil, they inhere some elements of prejudice that need to be unravelled. Nevertheless, I proceed by first articulating the positions of Odùwolé and Fáyémi on the philosophical problem of evil in Yorùbá thought, which I consider having certain philosophical twists. This would allow me to analyse and theoretically refute their views by drawing insights from some verses of _Ifá_ literary corpus on the attributes of Olódùmarè and some other deities, thereby
clearing the cobwebs which serve as obscuring factors to our conceptualisation of the philosophical problem of evil in Yorùbá thought.

Due to the influence of colonialism on Africa and the Judeo-Christian religious system, which it was able to establish successively, some prominent African scholars like D. O. Fagunwa, Mbi- ti, Idowu, Odùwọlé and many others have unconsciously relativised Christianity and its terminologies for it to fit into the African religious and cultural enclaves. For instance, in the Yorùbá context, such Judeo-Christian concepts as God, Satan, and Devil have been equated with some terms representing certain figures in the Yorùbá pantheon of gods. Accordingly, conceptual colonisation ensued as a lamentable by-product of colonialism. This conceptual colonisation prompted some scholars like Bojají Idowu, Ade Dopamu, and Ebún Odùwọlé to argue that Olódùmarè possesses some attributes similar to those of the Judeo-Christian God. On this basis, Odùwọlé argues that Olódùmarè possesses the attributes of Omnipotence, Omniscience, and Omnibenevolence. Accordingly, she contends that the existence of evil and suffering contradict the attributes of Olódùmarè. Besides, Odùwọlé submits that the philosophical problem of evil is universal and that the Western formulation of the problem is the same in the Yorùbá thought system (Odùwọlé 12).

Reacting to Odùwọlé’s submission, Kazeem Fàyèmí avers that the philosophical problem of evil is not universal. He argues that evil exists in African thought like everywhere else, but this does not necessarily lead to the philosophical problem of evil in the Yorùbá philosophical thinking (Fàyèmí 125). Fàyèmí’s reason for this submission is that once it can be proved that the reality of evil does not contradict the existence of Olódùmarè, then there is no philosophical problem of evil. For him, the main propositions that can illustrate the logical structure of the problem of evil are:

i. Olódùmarè exists;
ii. Olódùmarè has infinite and perfect attributes of omnipotence and omnibenevolence;
iii. Evil exists (125).

The first and the third propositions are, according to him, incontrovertible for the Yorùbá, while the second does not represent the nature of Olódùmarè in the Yorùbá thought system as Olódùmarè is neither omnipotent nor omnibenevolent (125–126). Given this line of thought, Fàyèmí contends that:

It is arguable and evident that none of the propositions are contradictory. Hence, there is no philosophical problem of evil in Yorùbá metaphysical thought. The philosophical problem of evil, a perennial problem in Western philosophy, is [a] non-problematic issue in traditional Yorùbá thought…the problem of evil does not therefore exist in Yorùbá thought because Olódùmarè and his divinities are said to be capable of doing both good and bad. Unlike the supreme being of the Christian religion, Olódùmarè and the other gods are never regarded as perfect beings that cannot be malevolent (125–126).

Fàyèmí’s explanation above seems to suggest that only the logical formulation of the problem of evil exists or is philosophical. This impression has a direct reductionistic implication for philosophy and its problems. His denial of the existence of the philosophical problem of evil in Yorùbá thought on the basis that it does not have a logical structure observable in the Western formulation appears to be an absolutist position. One wonders whether Fàyèmí had exhaustively explored and inspected all possible philosophical formulations of the problem of evil and suspected that traces of any of them were absent in Yorùbá thought before he made such outright denial. As a reductio ad absurdum, Fàyèmí’s denial can be illustrated as follows:

(1) only the logical formulation of the problem of evil exists;
(2) only the logical formulation of the problem of evil is philosophical;
(3) the logical problem of evil does not arise in Yorùbá thought;
(4) it follows, therefore, that there is no philosophical problem of evil in Yorùbá thought.
The above seems to echo Alvin Plantinga’s claim that once it can be proved deductively that there is no contradiction between the existence of a morally good God and the reality of evil, then all that is left of the problem of evil becomes a pastoral concern instead of a philosophical concern (Plantinga 63–64). However, this is a mistaken view as it presents a parochial impression of philosophy by philosophers of the analytic bent. Philosophy is not a discipline whose ultimate business, preoccupations and concerns are exhaustively determinable or completely wrappable in a deductive detection of contradiction. For one, the first premise above is regrettably false: there are other formulations of the problem of evil. The second premise is also false: other formulations, namely, evidential, existential, Buddhist, Stoic, and so on, are as philosophical as the logical formulation. While the third premise is true, it does not imply that other conceptions or formulations of the problem of evil in Yorùbá thought are impossible. Accordingly, the premises of the argument do not conclusively substantiate the claim.

Fáyěmí confesses that “there is existence of evil in African thought like everywhere else but that it does not necessarily lead to the philosophical problem of evil in Yorùbá philosophical thinking” (Fáyěmí 125). Nonetheless, the fact that the Yorùbá do not see any logical contradiction between the existence of evil and the existence of Olódùmarè does not mean that there is no philosophical problem of evil in Yorùbá thought. On the other hand, if the logical problem of evil does not arise in the Yorùbá thought system or any other thought system for that matter, it does not follow that other philosophical formulations of the problem of evil do not arise in it. In fact, Fáyěmí unconsciously agrees with this view when he observes that the notion of evil in the Yorùbá thought system raises issues that are of metaphysical relevance like:

Why did Olódùmarè create a world with the intermediary supports of the divinities and allow the divinities to have so much power and unrestricted freedom and exercise of principalities of power to cause evil in the world? Why has Olódùmarè not created human beings in a way that the exercise of their freedom will not occasion evil at all? Why has Olódùmarè decided to introduce the concept of evil to human language, dictionary and experience? (127)

The above are some of the philosophical problems which Fáyěmí himself raises from the notion of evil in the Yorùbá thought system. To be sure, some of the questions Fáyěmí raises above are galvanising factors to different shades of theodicies postulated in Western, Eastern, and African philosophies. This, however, contradicts his stark denial of the philosophical problem of evil in Yorùbá thought. If the above metaphysical questions do not provoke a problem following Fáyěmí’s submission, then it follows that metaphysical issues are not philosophical issues.

It is incontrovertible that people of every culture raise these kinds and other related questions. Against this background, it seems that any attempt made by any culture to answer the enigmatic questions of existence, whether logically, existentially, metaphysically or in whichever way, is philosophical.

The Buddhist formulation of the problem of evil and human suffering, for instance, neither alludes to the existence of any known God nor aims to establish a contradiction between the attributes of a morally good God and the reality of evil. Buddhists contend that existence generally is characterised by evil. However, they attribute the origin of evil in existence to human cravings. This conception may have its shortcomings, but it remains true that it also has its strengths. It does not make any allusion to the existence or non-existence of God to explain the problem of evil and human suffering in the world. Yet, this explanation is highly philosophical.

One vital implication of the above is that the existence of God is not a necessary condition for formulating all philosophical problems of evil. There are many philosophical conceptions of the problem of evil, of which the logical formulation is one. Hence, other explanations, conceptions, and formulations of the problem of evil which do not refer to the existence of God or base their conceptions on the examination of the contradiction between the existence of God and the reality of evil are as philosophically valid as the logical formulation which does.
Having said the above, it is imperative to mention that Odúwọlé’s submission on the attributes of Olodumàrè in relation to the existence of evil does not represent what is, in fact, obtainable in Yorùbá thought. The attributes of Olodumàrè and other deities are consistent with the reality of evil. Olodumàrè is not omnipotent, omniscience or omnibenevolent as the Judea-Christian God. For this reason, the logical problem of evil, which evokes inconsistency or contradiction, does not arise in Yorùbá thought. Kólá Abímbọ́lá (49) and Segun Ogungbemi (81–82) trace the origin of evil to the activities of the Ajogun (warriors against men) and contend that Èshù and the Àjè (the witches) straddle the good-evil divides. Nevertheless, all deities (benevolent or malevolent) are believed to have been saddled with their respective tasks by Olodumàrè. Since Olodumàrè in Yorùbá thought, is neither absolutely good nor evil, it follows that the activities of the ministers of Olodumàrè are consistent with the attributes of the force (Olodumàrè) that saddled them with their respective tasks.

It is understandable that Odúwọlé’s account is based on the existing literature of African scholars on the nature of Olodumàrè. However, this is inexcusable. Before Odúwọlé, Idowu (40–41) described Olodumàrè as an Omnipotent (all-powerful) and Omniscient (all-wise, all-knowing and all-seeing) being. Quoting Idowu, Mbiti (31) asserts that “it is a common saying among the Yorùbá that only God is wise and they believe that God is the discerner of hearts who sees both the inside and the outside of man.” Following these two African scholars as well, Awolalu (14–15) contends that Olodumàrè is omnipotent and omniscient.

However, the above descriptions of the attributes of Olodumàrè contradict and misrepresent its nature. In Yorùbá thought, Olodumàrè is not all-powerful, in which case, it is not omnipotent. It is not all-knowing or all-wise, in which case, it is not omniscient. In addition, it is not all-good, in which case, it is not omnibenevolent. In fact, in Yorùbá thought, unlike the Western, Olodumàrè is genderless. The separation of power and duty among Olodumàrè and its divinities establishes the fact that Olodumàrè is not omnipotent. Idowu (49) recognises this when he writes that:

He [Olodumàrè] has portioned out the theocratic administration of the world among the divinities whom He [It] brought into being and ordained to their several offices. By functions of these divinities, and the authority conferred upon them, they are “almighty” within certain limits. But their “almightiness” is limited and entirely subject to the absolute authority of the creator Himself [Itself].

While Idowu recognises that Olodumàrè is not almighty, he still asserts that It is absolute. This is contradictory. Apart from that, no evidence supports Idowu’s claim that Olodumàrè brought the divinities to which it apportions authorities into existence. Instead, they are believed to have co-existed with Olodumàrè (Abímbọ́lá 59–60). Idowu also describes Olodumàrè as “the Creator”. However, the task of creation is believed in Yorùbá thought to have been directly assigned to Òba tàla or Òrìsànlá while other divinities like Ajálá (moulder of inner heads) and Ògún also help out in certain ways. Olodumàrè only supplies Èmi (life), which is the life principle. This means that Olodumàrè merely participates in the process of creation.

Kólá Abímbọ́lá (Yorùbá Culture) contends that the relationship between Olodumàrè and the three divinities (Obàtalá, Èshù, and Èfè) that co-existed with It can be explained by using functional and existential hierarchies. On the existential hierarchy, Olodumàrè, the ultimate reality, is supreme to other deities. However, on functional hierarchy, the three deities are supreme to Olodumàrè in their respective roles. In this sense, “the entity at the apex of the Yorùbá cosmos will depend on what issues and concerns we are interested in” (71). For instance, regarding daily activities in the cosmos, Èshù is the supreme deity because he is the universal policeman. When it comes to creation, Obàtalá, Ògún, Olodumàrè and Ajálá are involved, but Obàtalá is supreme; when it comes to political administration of the cosmos, Olodumàrè is supreme; when it comes to knowledge and wisdom Ôrùnmílò, also known as Èfè, is supreme (71–72). Based on
the functional hierarchy, therefore, Idowu, Mbiti, Awolalu and Odùwọlé uphold erroneous views about the attributes of Olódùmarè. In fact, the second verse in a principal chapter of Ifá called Ìwòrì Mèjì, testifies to the supremacy of Òrúnmílà over Olódùmarè on matters relating to knowledge and wisdom thus:

Ọwọ́ èwe ọ tó pépẹ;
Tí ágbàlagbà ò wọ akèrègbẹ;
Isè èwè bẹ átgbà
Kí ó má ọ̀kò mọ;
Gbobgo wa ni a nísè a jò ní bè 'raa wa;
A dìá fún Òrúnmílà,
Èyí tí akápòo rè,
Ọ pé léjó l'òdò Olódùmarè.
Olódùmarè wáá ránísé sí Òrúnmílà
Pè kí ó wáá ọ̀dí náá
Tí kó h gbe akápòo rè.
Nígbà tí Òrúnmílà dé ìwájú Olódùmarè,
Ọ ní òun sà gbogbo agbára òun fún akápò,
Ọ ní ipín akápò ni kó gbó
Nígbà náá ni ọ̀rọ́ náá
Tó wáá yé Olódùmarè yèkéyéké;
Inúú rè rè sì dúnn wí pé
Ọun kó dájó eékún kan.
Ní Eléddáá bà ní láti ojó náá ló,
Ọmọ èdá kan kó gbowo dà ejó eékún kan.
Ánikándájó, o ó ọ́ṣẹ́un;
Ánikándájó o ó ọ́ṣẹ́yàn;
Nígbà tí ó o gbó ọ́ṣẹ́ onikéjì.
Emi l'o dájó sè? (W. Abímbọ́lá, Àwọ́n Ojú Odu Mèrrèrinlògún 16–17)

An adolescent's hand does not get to the ceiling;
That of an adult does not enter the gourd;
Whatever errand a child sends an adult,
Let not that adult refuse again
For we all have errands that we run for one another.

Divination was performed for Òrúnmílà,
Whose devotee
Would allege before Olódùmarè
Olódùmarè sent for Òrúnmílà
That he should come and explain the reason
His devotee was not prosperous in his service.
When Òrúnmílà got to the presence of Olódùmarè,
He said he tried his best for his devotee
He said it was the devotee’s destiny that thwarted his efforts.

It was then that the issue
It [Olódùmarè] was then happy
That it had not passed a biased judgement
Then the maker said from that day onward,
No human being should pass a biased judgement.
Biased judges, you are not to be thanked;
Biased judges, you are inhumane.
When you have not heard from the other person,
Why did you pass a judgement?

[My translation]
Apart from corroborating the separation of power among the deities, the verse above emphasises the functional structure of the hierarchy of the deities which places Ọ̀rùnmìlà above Olódùmarè on matters relating to knowledge and wisdom. It also shows that Olódùmarè is the Supreme Being when it comes to political administration, and that is why Ọ̀rùnmìlà’s devotee tends his reservations against his Òrìsà (Ọ̀rùnmìlà) before Olódùmarè, while Olódùmarè presides over the case like a judge. This shows that Olódùmarè has its limitations and boundaries, especially when it comes to knowing. It cannot therefore be said to be omniscient, as Idowu, Mbiti, Awolalu, and Odùwọlé have argued.

The philosophical problem of evil in Yorùbá thought: an existentialist conception

In this section, I shall articulate the existential nature of the problem of evil in Yorùbá thought. Previously, B. J. Balogun and A. I. Ogunyomi have written on the existential twist of the problem of evil in Yorùbá thought. However, these writings focused on discussing other issues relating to the problem of evil and their existential implications in Yorùbá thought. Accordingly, they did little in properly and systematically outlining the formulation of the problem (see B. J. Balogun 56–76; Ogunyomi 107–122). I attempt to do so here.

Existentialism is a philosophical movement that arose in Western scholarship in the 19th cum 20th centuries. However, it has its traits and traces in all the epochs of Western philosophy and the histories of human existence. The central focus of existentialism is human beings and their existential situations (Macquarries 2); hence, it applies to all human beings irrespective of their geographical locations. The reality of evil in the world is, itself, primarily an existential problem. It is against this background that I find it suitable for re-investigating the philosophical problem of evil in Yorùbá thought.

There are some Yorùbá proverbs and sayings like tibi tire la da ìlẹ́ aye (the world was created both good and evil); ẹ̀jìyàn kò lè ṣe bare, kò má ṣe ẹ̀jì ọ̀jọ́ kan (human beings cannot receive good without also receiving evil in a day). These proverbs establish the existential nature of evil in the Yorùbá conceptual scheme. In other words, they emphasise the fact that both good and evil exist in the actual human world and that human beings cannot escape from both. It is to this end that Ada Agada (306) maintains that our actual world reveals evidence of both good and evil – evil does not exist in a vacuum (B. J. Balogun 66). This suggests that the notions of good and evil in relation to human beings are largely existential in nature and meaningful within the context of human experiences in existence.

Many existentialists³ have written extensively on the problem of human suffering, nothingness, absurdity, anguish, anxiety, facticities and the meaninglessness of the world.⁴ These are what can be summarily described as evil in the existentialist parlance. The existential problem of evil can therefore be formulated in the following way:

(1) Human beings are in a world where there is evil (2) The presence of evil in the world positions a great hindrance to the happiness of human beings (3) Human beings make all efforts to make their existential situation better, thereby avoiding evil (4) However, evil is unavoidable, leaving human beings persistently stranded, optionless and hopeless in existence.

This situation is what Moses Òkè describes as “man’s feeling of not being at home in the world where he must nonetheless have his home, and which, in fact, is his home” (Òkè 12–36). The Yorùbás are aware of the reality of both evil and good in the world and they try everything within their power to resist evil.

Segun Ogungbemi maintains that nothing is as intelligible to human beings as the understanding of their existence in relation to both life and death (Ogungbemi 82). Meanwhile, while everyone wants to live, no one wishes to be deprived of good living and the good fortunes of life (wealth, good health, marriage, children, and long life). This is precisely the case with the Yorùbá people. Hence, they make every effort to make their existence meaningful.
The efforts of human beings to make existence bearable for themselves through every possible means and the constant frustration they encounter in the attempt to do so in the face of evil is, incontrovertibly, an existentialist problem. Ogunyomi (107–122) emphasises this dilemma when he explains that despite all their efforts to avoid evil in the world, human beings are ultimately helpless in the face of evil, as no measure seems to be potent enough to entirely ward evil off from human existence.

Fáyémi (128) claims that ire (good) and ibi (evil) are not separate entities but one entity in two interdependent folds. This is not consistent with the Yorùbá understanding of the two phenomena. The Yorùbás indeed believe that the world, as we have it, is densely filled with both good and evil. However, it is not true that the Yorùbá uphold an inseparable thesis about good and evil. What we may reasonably argue for within the Yorùbá conceptual scheme, as far as good and evil are concerned, is an inescapable thesis. Nevertheless, the Yorùbás believe that in a world that is densely filled with good and evil, one can still hope to enjoy good fortune as long as one is alive and continues to make efforts towards averting evil. One does not intentionally hope for evil as human beings always want to identify with the good occurrences of nature while they always want to dissociate themselves from evil. That is why Mbiti (204) maintains that “African peoples are much aware of evil in the world, and in various ways, they endeavour to fight it”. In addition, the first verse of Ọ̀kaǹra ̀n Mejì, the eighth principal chapter of Ifá, explains how human beings always cherish and crave a good and comfortable life and how they detest a life of discomfort, characterised by evil and suffering. The verse goes thus:

Ọ̀kaǹra kan yìí náà, ire dé.
Ewé ìjéòfóò ni yòó fo ibi nù fún wa.
Ewé ejinrin wèwè ni yòó wè è dànu.
Ewé atapàra ló ní kì ibi ò tā nù l’òrù mi… (W. Abímbọ́lá, Àwọn Ojú Odu Méjìrindínlógún 46)

Ọ̀kaǹra has encountered this too, here comes good fortune.
It is the leaf of ìjéòfóò that will take evil away from us.
It is the leaf of ejinrin wèwè that will wash it away.
The leaf of atapàra says evil should bounce away from my head...⁵ [My translation]

If Fáyémi’s claim were to be the case, the Yorùbá would have found it unnecessary to make efforts towards preventing or avoiding evil. However, reversed is the case because they always attempt to avoid evil through supplications, incantations, sacrifice, and prayers, as evidenced in the above verse. This is corroborated again by a supplication in the third verse of Òguǹđá Mejì, the seventh chapter of Ifá, which goes thus:

Ọ́nì lọ́njì Onísin Iko;
Ọ̀la lọ́lọ̀ Ọ̀bàràmọ̀jẹ̀;
Ọtunlọ́ omo iyá è.
Bí ó wáá,
Bí ó wá, 5
Eníkan ó mò.
A díá fún Òrúnmílà,
Ifá ó ràtà bọmọ è
Bí Igún Igémò.
Èwí rílé Adó,
Ifá ràtà bò mí,
Ibi pò lóde.
Ágbáfá níí ràtāa bo yanrin lódò;
Ifá ràtà bòmí,
Ibi pò lóde. 10
Ètìpọ̀-olá níí rátāa bolè.
Ifá rátà bò mí,
Ibi pò lóde.
Ìhùùhù ladìẹ́ fií ràtàá bọmọ ẹ̀, Ṣààrạ̀̀ta ọ̀mọ̀ bà mí, 20
Ibi pò lóde. (W. Abímbọ́lá, Ìjìnlẹ̀̀ Ohu ̀n Ẹnu Ifá, Apá Kejì 104–106)

Today belongs to the king of Ìkọ̀; Tomorrow belongs to Òbàràmọ̀jè; The following day is like the previous. Whether it will come; Whether it will not come; No one knows. Divination was performed for Òrùnmìlà, Ifá would protect his children Like the vulture of Ìgẹ̀mọ̀ town. High chief of the household of Ado, Ifá protect me, Everywhere is full of evil out there. It is erosion that covers the sands of the river; Ifá protect me, Everywhere is full of evil out there. It is Ètípọ́n-ọlá that takes cover over the earth; Ifá, take cover over me, Everywhere is full of evil out there. Fowls protect their chicks with their feathers; Òrùnmìlà protect me, Everywhere is full of evil out there.⁶

This verse shows the negativity of evil and how human beings always want to avoid it. Aside from the above, several other verses in different chapters of Ifá, as would be shown below, describe evil as a negative and entirely separate entity from good. In addition, they describe evil as what both human beings and the deities always want to do away with, in spite of the consciousness they have about its reality and their belief about its inescapableness in existence. For instance, when Èṣù informed the people of Ìkọ̀ọ̀lọ́ in the verse of Ifá chapter called Òbàrà Mejì, that Ægbigbọ–niwọnràn, the bastard son of their late king, an apprentice of Òrùnmìlà, was coming home to bury his late father with a load of evil on his head (which Òrùnmìlà himself placed upon him because of his unfaithfulness to Òrùnmìlà and his failure to make the appropriate sacrifice to Èṣù and other divinities), the people trooped out to the gate of the village in order to prevent him from entering their village or dropping his load of evil. The verse describes the reaction of the people of Ìkọ̀ọ̀lọ́ to the information passed to them by Èṣù as follows:

…Ni àwọn ará Ṓde Ìkọ̀ọ̀lọ̀ bá sa araà wọ́n jọ, Wón múra, Wón dènà de Àgbigbò. 195
Bí Àgbigbò ti yo ní òkánkán, Àwọn ará Ṓde Ìkọ̀ọ̀lọ̀ fariwo ta. Wón n wí pé:
“Ìkú lo gbé délè yí o, Àwa ̀rà. Àgbigbò–niwọnràn gbérù è o; Gbérù è, Àwa ̀rà. 200
Àrùn lo gbé délè yí o, Àwa ̀rà. Àgbigbò–niwọnràn gbérù è o; Gbérù è,

[My translation]
Àwa ò rà.
Ôfò lo gbé délè yì o,
Àwa ò rà. 210
Agbìgbo–niwọnrà n gbérù ë o;
Gbérù ë,
Àwà ò rà
Ìjànlẹ̀ lo gbé délè yì o,
Àwa ò rà. 215
Agbìgbo–niwọnrà n gbérù ë o;
Gbérù ë,
Àwa ò rà.
Àgbìgbo–niwọnrà n gbérù ë o;
Gbérù ë,
Àwa ò rà.
Àgbìgbo–niwọnrà n gbérù ë o;
Gbérù ë,
Àwa ò rà. 220
Àgbìgbo–niwọnrà n gbérù ë o;
Gbérù ë,
Àwa ò rà.
Àgbìgbo–niwọnrà n gbérù ë o;
Gbérù ë,
Àwa ò rà.
Àgbìgbo–niwọnrà n gbérù ë o;
Gbérù ë,
Àwa ò rà. (W. Abímbolá, Ìjìnlẹ̀ Ohùn Ènu Èfù, Apá Keji 57–58; see also W. Abímbolá, Sixteen Great Poems of Èfù 187–188).

…The people of Èkọ̀lọ̀ therefore gathered themselves together,
They got themselves well prepared,
And blocked the road of Agbìgbo. 195
As soon as Agbìgbo appeared from afar off,
The people of Èkọ̀lọ̀ started to shout.
They were saying:
It is death that you are carrying into this land;
We will not share in it. 200
Àgbìgbo–niwọnrà take away your load.
Take away your evil load.
We will not share in it.
It is disease which you are bringing into this city.
We will not share in it. 205
A gbìgbo–niwọnrà take away your load,
Take away your evil load,
We will not share in it.
It is loss which you are bringing into this city,
We will not share in it. 210
Àgbìgbo–niwọnrín take away your load,
Take away your evil load,
We will not share in it.
It is danger which you are bringing into this city,
We will not share in it. 215
Àgbìgbo–niwọnrà take away your load;
Take away your evil load,
We will not share in it.
Àgbìgbo–niwọnrà take away your load;
Take away your evil load,
We will not share in it. [Wándé Abímbolá’s translation]

The reaction of the people of Èkọ̀lọ̀, as illustrated in the above Èfù verse, shows how strongly the Yorùbá believe that evil is negative and that it should always be resisted while good is positive and should always be craved by human beings. The sixth verse of Owọnrin Mèjì also attests to this thus:

Ọ̀rùnmílà ní ó ń dúni yunmuyunmu,
Ọ̀n kùn yunmuyunmu
L’órlí ìpáta ìgbàrànsàala.
Wón ní ta ní ó dúni yunmuyunmu,
Tí ó kùn yunmuyunmu 5
What is closely at hand?

L’ori apata agbaransaala?

It is prosperity that is closely at hand.

Ni yoo di ikuj naa fun oun.

They say it is prosperity that is very near.

Ni yoo di orun naa fun oun.

They ask what is very near.

Ni yoo di o joo fun oun.

On the rock of agbaransaala?

On the rock of agbaransaala.

They say it is prosperity that is very near.

On the rock of agbaransaala?

It is prosperity that is closely at hand.
On the rock of ọgbàrànsàala.
Ọ̀rùnmìlù says open the door for it
That the good fortune, owner of the day may come in.
Ọ̀rùnmìlù says it is very near,
It is closely at hand
On the rock of ọgbàrànsàala.
They ask what is very near,
What is closely at hand
On the rock of ọgbàrànsàala?
They say it is the good of wife that is very near,
It is the good of wife that is closely at hand
On the rock of ọgbàrànsàala.
Ọ̀rùnmìlù says open the door for it
That the good fortune, owner of the day may come in.
Ọ̀rùnmìlù says it is very near,
It is closely at hand
On the rock of ọgbàrànsàala.
They ask what is very near,
What is closely at hand
On the rock of ọgbàrànsàala?
Ọ̀rùnmìlù says it is the good of children that is very near,
It is the good of children that is closely at hand
On the rock of ọgbàrànsàala.
Ọ̀rùnmìlù says open the door for it
That the good fortune, owner of the day may come in.
Ọ̀rùnmìlù says it is imminent,
It is closely at hand
On the rock of ọgbàrànsàala.
They ask what is imminent,
What is closely at hand
On the rock of ọgbàrànsàala?
They say it is death that is imminent,
It is death that is closely at hand
On the rock of ọgbàrànsàala.
Ọ̀rùnmìlù says the leaf of ọdídímọ́nísàayùn
Will shut the door of death for him.
Ọ̀rùnmìlù says the leaf of ọdídímọ́nísàayùn
Will also shut the door of diseases for him;
It will shut the doors of loss, paralysis and affliction for him.
Ọ̀rùnmìlù says the leaf of ọdídímọ́nísàayùn
Will shut the doors of all the Ajogun for him.
Ọ̀rùnmìlù, Bara, Āgbọnmirẹ̀gún,
I did not ask you to shut the door of good fortune.? [My translation]

The above verse explains the binary relationship between good and evil in Yorùbá thought. However, it explains how evil and good can come together without one being necessarily present in the other in that one can be claimed while the other can be rejected. Ọ̀rùnmìlù, in the above verse, substantiates the difference between good and evil and that human beings always aspire to possess all good fortune that will make existence comfortable for them even when they are not oblivious of the enormity of evil present in human existence. This supports our position that the reality of evil, far from being a logical problem, is an existential problem in Yorùbá thought. It makes it evident that evil constitutes a significant obstruction to the desires of human beings for good fortune in existence.
The Yorùbá saying: *ire ń bẹ nínú ibi; ibi ń bẹ nínú ire* (there is good in evil; there is evil in good) merely points to the fact that evil can emerge or be perpetrated in guise of good and good can emerge or be perpetrated in guise of good. Again, the saying *nínú ìkòkò dúdú l’ẹ̀kọ funfun ti jáde* (white corn–pap comes out of black pots) has a largely contextual meaning. For instance, it may mean that morally wanting parents can produce and raise morally worthy children. It does not strictly imply that once there is good, evil must be present in it or that when there is evil, good must be present in it. Accordingly, the Yorùbá thought system provokes an existential problem of evil which is as philosophical as the logical problem of evil. It is philosophical in the sense that human beings find themselves in situations and circumstances that negate their aspirations and expectations in existence. They struggle so hard through various means to escape from these situations. However, the efforts of human beings to escape from their existential concerns prove abortive in the final analysis, which leaves them stranded before their problems and makes the question: “what is the meaning and essence of human existence?” seemingly unsatisfactorily answerable.

Yet, the Yorùbás believe that total surrenderness to defeat or relapse to the darkness of pessimism is unacceptable: human beings must strive continuously to make their existence meaningful.¹⁸ Now, to argue that this is not philosophical is to embrace a restrictive conception of philosophy that valorises logic and analyticity as ultimate paradigms of “philosophicality” and “problematicality”. As I have argued earlier, this view imposes a conceptual constraint on the philosophical problem of evil. It is therefore misleading.

The existential problem of evil deals with the concrete experience of human beings as they grapple with and react to the facticities that characterise their existence and the very urgent need to make meaning out of those facticities. However, the logical problem of evil remains in the abstract realm of conceptual analysis and argumentation – far removed from the concrete experiential conditions of human beings – placing its most invaluable priority on the establishment of consistency and inconsistency – an exercise which has no serious effect or profound impact on the practical lives of human beings as they grapple with the facticities of life such as illness, diseases, deformities, loss, curse, trouble, imprisonment, death – in short, the inconveniences – that densely characterise the real world of human beings.

**Conclusion**

In the above, I discussed the controversies surrounding the conception of the philosophical problem of evil in Yorùbá thought, specifically between Odùwọlé and Fáyèmí. I explained some contentions and misconceptions of the philosophical problem of evil in relation to Olódùmaré and its divinities in Yorùbá thought by some African scholars. However, by drawing some insights from several verses of *Ifá* chapters, I refuted the position that the Yorùbá thought system is oblivious to the philosophical problem of evil simply because the logical formulation of the problem that raises the questions of inconsistency and incompatibility is absent from it. I uphold the position that those who embrace this view have a parochial and reductionistic understanding of the philosophical problem of evil. This is because there are other conceptions of evil that are as philosophically substantial as the logical conception. I discussed the problem of evil in Yorùbá thought from the existentialist perspective and drew insights from several verses of *Ifá* to substantiate my argument and provide a theoretical refutation of the positions of Odùwọlé and Fáyèmí on the philosophical problem of evil in Yorùbá thought.

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¹⁸ Augustine University, Ilara–Epe, Nigeria.
Notes

1 A few notable examples are Idowu (Olódùmarè), Mbiti (African Religions and Philosophy), Awolalu (Yorùbá Belief and Sacrificial Rites), Bewaji (Olódùmarè), Dọpamu (Esu), Odùwọlé (The dialectics of ire (goodness) and ibi (evilness)), A. O. Balogun (‘The nature of evil and human wickedness in traditional African thought’), Oshitelu (2010), Fáyẹmí (‘Ire and Ibi’), Igboine (‘Èṣù and the problem of evil’), and J. B. Balogun J. B. (‘Èṣù’).

2 See Fáyẹmí (‘Ire and Ibi’) and Igboine (‘Èṣù and the Problem of Evil’).

3 Albert Camus, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Soren Kierkegaard, Jean-Paul Sartre, Maurice Friedman, Martin Heidegger, John Macquarries, and a host of others.

4 Macquarries (4) explains that philosophers from Kierkegaard to Heidegger and Satre sought to show that these notions are not without significance for philosophy. Karl Jaspers is another existentialist whose position is compelling. His idea of the “limit-situations” the “five antinomies of human existence which are: death, guilt, suffering, strife, and chance is all-encompassing. It captures the various notions of different existentialists like Kierkegaard, whose concentration is on sickness, falleness and death; Dostoevsky, whose concern is with the natural wickedness of human beings, above which he exonерates beastial cruelty; Sartre, whose emphasis is on nothingness and meaninglessness; Heidegger, whose emphasis is on facticities, throwness, abandonment and death; and Albert Camus, whose focus is on death, suicide, and the unending toil of human beings in existence – the Sisyphean stone – against which he recommends a rebellion.

5 Ètipọ́n-ọlá is a leguminous plant that spreads over the earth.

6 Àjẹ́òfólè, Ejìnrìn wẹ́wẹ́, and Atapàrà are all leaves that are believed to bear potent protective powers against misfortunes.

7 Bara and Àgbọnmìrègún, are names of Òrúnmilà. The rock of àgbàráǹsàala is believed to be where the witches and the deities made a series of covenants. It is also understood as the earth or the world. Dídímọnísàayùn is a leaf that is believed to possess protective power against misfortune and evil.

8 Ogunyomi (107–122) discusses in detail the strandedness and optionlessness encountered by human beings due to the abortiveness of the measures prescribed in the Yorùbá thought system for suppressing evil.

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