

An Existential Interpretation of Evil: A Critique of Èbùn Odùwọ́lé and Kazeem Fáyẹmí 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, Èbùn Odùwọ́lé and Kazeem Fáyẹmí 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, Odùwọ́lé 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, Fáyẹmí 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 *Ifá*.

Keywords: philosophical problem of evil, Yorùbá thought, Èbùn Odùwọ́lé, Kazeem Fáyẹmí, existential problem of evil

Introduction

Although 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 Èbùn Odùwọ́lé and Kazeem Fáyẹmí on this problem. Odùwọ́lé 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, Fáyẹmí contends that the attributes of Olódùmarè and the Judeo-Christian God are not the same, which, for him, makes Odùwọ́lé's incompatibility thesis untenable and, philosophically, makes evil a non-problem in Yorùbá thought. Accordingly, Fáyẹmí submits that the philosophical problem of evil does not arise in Yorùbá thought.

Nevertheless, while Odùwọ́lé 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 Fáyẹmí'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. Fáyẹmí 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 (Òràngún 22–39), some attribute the existence of evil to the activities of Èṣù, 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 (Odùwọ́lé 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 (Abímbońá, *Sixteen Great Poems of Ifá*). Further still, some have argued that although the Yorùbás 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.²

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 Odùwọ́lé and Fáyẹmí 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, Mbiti, Idowu, Odùwólé 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 Bọlaji Idowu, Ade Dọpamu, and Èbùn Odùwólé to argue that Olódùmarè possesses some attributes similar to those of the Judeo-Christian God. On this basis, Odùwólé 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, Odùwólé 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 (Odùwólé 12).

Reacting to Odùwólé's submission, Kazeem Fáyẹmí 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 (Fáyẹmí 125). Fáyẹmí'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, Fáyẹmí 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).

Fáyẹmí'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 Fáyẹmí 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*, Fáyẹmí'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.

Fáyẹmí 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” (Fáyẹmí 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, Fáyẹmí 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 Fáyẹmí himself raises from the notion of evil in the Yorùbá thought system. To be sure, some of the questions Fáyẹmí 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 Fáyẹmí'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 Odùwólé's submission on the attributes of Olódùmarè in relation to the existence of evil does not represent what is, in fact, obtainable in Yorùbá thought. The attributes of Olódùmarè and other deities are consistent with the reality of evil. Olódùmarè 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 Abímbólá (49) and Segun Ogungbemi (81–82) trace the origin of evil to the activities of the *Ajogun* (warriors against men) and contend that Èṣù and the *Àjé* (the witches) straddle the good–evil divides. Nevertheless, all deities (benevolent or malevolent) are believed to have been saddled with their respective tasks by Olódùmarè. Since Olódùmarè in Yorùbá thought, is neither absolutely good nor evil, it follows that the activities of the ministers of Olódùmarè are consistent with the attributes of the force (Olódùmarè) that saddled them with their respective tasks.

It is understandable that Odùwólé's account is based on the existing literature of African scholars on the nature of Olódùmarè. However, this is inexcusable. Before Odùwólé, Idowu (40–41) described Olódùmarè 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 Olódùmarè is omnipotent and omniscient.

However, the above descriptions of the attributes of Olódùmarè contradict and misrepresent *Its* nature. In Yorùbá thought, Olódùmarè 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, Olódùmarè is genderless. The separation of power and duty among Olódùmarè and *Its* divinities establishes the fact that Olódùmarè is not omnipotent. Idowu (49) recognises this when he writes that:

He [Olódùmarè] 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 Olódùmarè is not almighty, he still asserts that *It* is absolute. This is contradictory. Apart from that, no evidence supports Idowu's claim that Olódùmarè brought the divinities to which it apportions authorities into existence. Instead, they are believed to have co-existed with Olódùmarè (Abímbólá 59–60). Idowu also describes Olódùmarè as “the Creator”. However, the task of creation is believed in Yorùbá thought to have been directly assigned to Ọbàtálá or Ọrìṣànlá while other divinities like Àjàlá (moulder of inner heads) and Ọ̀gún also help out in certain ways. Olódùmarè only supplies Èmí (life), which is the life principle. This means that Olódùmarè merely participates in the process of creation.

Kólá Abímbólá (*Yorùbá Culture*) contends that the relationship between Olódùmarè and the three divinities (Ọbàtálá, Èṣù, and Ifá) that co-existed with *It* can be explained by using functional and existential hierarchies. On the existential hierarchy, Olódùmarè, the ultimate reality, is supreme to other deities. However, on functional hierarchy, the three deities are supreme to Olódùmarè 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, Èṣù is the supreme deity because he is the universal policeman. When it comes to creation, Ọbàtálá, Ọ̀gún, Olódùmarè and Àjàlá are involved, but Ọbàtálá is supreme; when it comes to political administration of the cosmos, Olódùmarè is supreme; when it comes to knowledge and wisdom Ọ̀rúnmilá, also known as *Ifá*, is supreme (71–72). Based on

the functional hierarchy, therefore, Idowu, Mbiti, Awolalu and Odùwòlé 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 Ọrúnmilà over Olódùmarè on matters relating to knowledge and wisdom thus:

Ọwọ̀ èwe ò tó pẹ̀pẹ̀;
 Ti àgbàlagbà ò wọ̀ akèrègbè;
 Isẹ̀ èwé bẹ̀ àgbà
 Kí ó má ẹ̀ kọ̀ mọ̀;
 Gbogbo wa ni a nísẹ̀ a jọ̀ ní bẹ̀ 'raa wa; 5
 A díá fún Ọrúnmilà,
 Èyí tí akápò rẹ̀
 Ó pè lẹ́jọ̀ l'òdò Olódùmarè.
 Olódùmarè wáá ránísẹ̀ sí Ọrúnmilà
 Pé kí ó wáá sọ̀ idí nàa 10
 Tí kò fi gbe akápò rẹ̀.
 Nígbà tí Ọrúnmilà dé iwájú Olódùmarè,
 Ó ní òun sa gbogbo agbára òun fún akápò,
 Ó ní ipín akápò ni kò gbọ̀
 Nígbà nàa ni ọ̀rọ̀ nàa 15
 Tó wáá yé Olódùmarè yékéyéké;
 Inúu rẹ̀ẹ̀ sì dùn wí pé
 Òun kò dájọ̀ eékún kan.
 Ni Èlédàá bá ní láti ojọ̀ nàa lọ̀,
 Ọmọ̀ èdà kan kò gbòdò dá ejọ̀ eékún kan. 20
 Ànikaṅdájọ̀, o ò ẹ̀sun;
 Ànikaṅdájọ̀ o ò ẹ̀èyàn;
 Nígbà tí o ò gbọ̀ tẹ̀nu ọ̀nikẹ̀jì,
 Emi l'ò dájọ̀ ẹ̀? (W. Abímọ̀lá, *Àwọ̀n Ojú Odu Mèrẹ̀rẹ̀rindínlógún* 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. 5
 Divination was performed for Ọrúnmilà,
 Whose devotee
 Would allege before Olódùmarè
 Olódùmarè sent for Ọrúnmilà
 That he should come and explain the reason 10
 His devotee was not prosperous in his service.
 When Ọrúnmilà 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 15
 Became very clear to Olódùmarè
 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. 20
 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 Ọ̀rúnmilà 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 Ọ̀rúnmilà's devotee tenders his reservations against his Ọ̀rìsà (Ọ̀rúnmilà) 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 Odùwòlé 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 dá ilè ayé* (the world was created both good and evil); *èniyàn kò lèè gbare, kò má gba ibi ojò 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 Ọ̀kè 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” (Ọ̀kè 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.

Fáyemí (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 *Òkànràn Mèjì*, 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:

Òkànràn kan yí náà, ire dé.
Ewé àjéḍòfólè ni yóó fo ibi nù fún wa.
Ewé eḣinrin wéwé ni yóó wè é dànù.
Ewé atapàrà ló ní kí ibi ó ta nù l'órí mi... (W. Abímólá, *Àwọn Ojú Odu Mèrèrèrindínlógún* 46)

Òkànràn has encountered this too, here comes good fortune.

It is the leaf of *àjéḍòfólè* that will take evil away from us.

It is the leaf of *eḣinrin wéwé* that will wash it away.

The leaf of *atapàrà* says evil should bounce away from my head...⁵ [My translation]

If Fáyemí'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 *Ògúndá Mèjì*, the seventh chapter of *Ifá*, which goes thus:

Òní lònì Onísín Ìkò;
Òlā lōlā Òbàràḡmòjè
Òtunlā omọ iyá è
Bí ó wàá,
Bì ò wá, 5
Ènikan ò mò.
A díá fún Òrúnmilà,
Ifá ó ràtà bọmọ è
Bí Igún Ìgẹmọ.
Èwí nílé Adó, 10
Ifá ràtà bò mí,
Ibi pọ lóde.
Àgbàrá ní ràtàá bo yanrin lódò;
Ifá ràtà bòmí,
Ibi pọ lóde. 15
Ètípón-olá ní ràtàá bolẹ.
Ifá ràtà bò mí,

Ibi pò lóde.
 Ìhùhù ladié fí ràtáá bọmọ ẹ,
 Ọrúnmilà ràtá bọ mí, 20
 Ibi pò lóde. (W. Abímbólá, *Ìjìnlẹ̀ Ohùn Ẹnu Ifá, Apá Keji* 104–106)

Today belongs to the king of *Ìkọ*;
 Tomorrow belongs to *Ọbàràndjẹ*;
 The following day is like the previous.
 Whether it will come;
 Whether it will not come; 5
 No one knows.
 Divination was performed for *Ọrúnmilà*,
Ifá would protect his children
 Like the vulture of *Ìgẹmọ* town.
 High chief of the household of *Adó*, 10
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. 15
 It is *Ẹtípón-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;
Ọrúnmilà protect me, 20
 Everywhere is full of evil out there.⁶ [My translation]

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 Ẹṣù informed the people of *Ìkọ̀dọ̀lọ* in the verse of *Ifá* chapter called *Ọbàrà Mèjì*, that *Àgbìgbò-nìwọ̀nràn*, the bastard son of their late king, an apprentice of Ọrúnmilà, was coming home to bury his late father with a load of evil on his head (which Ọrúnmilà himself placed upon him because of his unfaithfulness to Ọrúnmilà and his failure to make the appropriate sacrifice to Ẹṣù 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 *Ìkọ̀dọ̀lọ* to the information passed to them by Ẹṣù as follows:

...Ni àwọ̀n ará ọ̀de Ìkọ̀dọ̀lọ̀ bá sa araa wọ̀n jọ,
 Wọ̀n múra,
 Wọ̀n dèná de Àgbìgbò. 195
 Bí Àgbìgbò tí yọ ní ọ̀kánkán,
 Àwọ̀n ará ọ̀de Ìkọ̀dọ̀lọ̀ fariwo ta.
 Wọ̀n ní wí pé:
 “Ìkú lo gbé délẹ̀ yí o,
 Àwa ọ̀ rà. 200
 Àgbìgbò-nìwọ̀nràn gbẹ̀rù ẹ̀ o;
 Gbẹ̀rù ẹ̀,
 Àwa ọ̀ rà.
 Àrùn lo gbé délẹ̀ yí o,
 Àwa ọ̀ rà. 205
 Àgbìgbò-nìwọ̀nràn gbẹ̀rù ẹ̀ o;
 Gbẹ̀rù ẹ̀,

Àwa ò rà. Òfò lo gbé délẹ yí o, Àwa ò rà.	210
Àgbìgbò-nìwònran gbèrù ẹ o; Gbèrù ẹ, Àwàwa ò rà Ìjàmbá lo gbé délẹ yí o, Àwa ò rà.	215
Àgbìgbò-nìwònran gbèrù ẹ o; Gbèrù ẹ, Àwa ò rà. Àgbìgbò-nìwònran gbèrù ẹ o; Gbèrù ẹ,	210
Àwa ò rà (W. Abimbólá, <i>Ìjùnlẹ Ohùn Ènu Ifá, Apá Keji</i> 57–58; see also W. Abimbólá, <i>Sixteen Great Poems of Ifá</i> 187–188).	
...The people of Ìkòḍḍò therefore gathered themselves together, They got themselves well prepared, And blocked the road of Àgbìgbò.	195
As soon as Àgbìgbò appeared from afar off, The people of Ìkòḍḍò started to shout. They were saying: It is death that you are carrying into this land; We will not share in it.	200
Àgbìgbò-nìwònran 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
Àgbìgbò-nìwònran 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
Àgbìgbò-nìwònran 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
Àgbìgbò-nìwònran take away your load; Take away your evil load, We will not share in it. Àgbìgbò-nìwònran take away your load; Take away your evil load, We will not share in it.	220
[Wándé Abimbólá's translation]	

The reaction of the people of Ìkòḍḍò, as illustrated in the above *Ifá* 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 *Òwònrin Méjì* also attests to this thus:

Òrúnmilà ní ó ní dún yunmuyunmu, Ó ní kùn yunmuyunmu L'órí àpáta àgbàrànsaala. Wón ní ta ní ní dún yunmuyunmu, Tí ní kùn yunmuyumu	5
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L'óri àpáta àgbàrànsaala? Wọn ní ajé l'ó ní dún yunmuyunmu, Ajé l'ó ní kùn yunmuyunmu L'óri àpáta àgbàrànsaala. Ọrúnmilà ní ẹ sílẹ̀kùn f'ólójó rere, K'ó wọlé wá.	10
Ọrúnmilà ní ní dún yunmuyunmu, Ó ní kùn yunmuyunmu L'óri àpáta àgbàrànsaala. Wọn ní kìn ní ní dún yunmuyunmu, Tí ní kùn yunmuyumu L'óri àpáta àgbàrànsaala? Wọn ní aya ní ní dún yunmuyunmu, Aya ní ní kùn yunmuyunmu L'óri àpáta àgbàrànsaala. Ọrúnmilà ní ẹ sílẹ̀kùn f'ólójó rere, K'ó wọlé wá.	15
Ọrúnmilà ní ó ní dún yunmuyunmu, Ó ní kùn yunmuyunmu L'óri àpáta àgbàrànsaala. Wọn ní kìn ní ní dún yunmuyunmu, Tí ní kùn yunmuyumu L'óri àpáta àgbàrànsaala? Ọrúnmilà ní ọmọ ní ní dún yunmuyunmu, Ọmọ ní ní kùn yunmuyunmu L'óri àpáta àgbàrànsaala. Ọrúnmilà ní ẹ sílẹ̀kùn f'ólójó rere, K'ó wọlé wá.	20
Ọrúnmilà ní ní dún yunmuyunmu, Ó ní kùn yunmuyunmu L'óri àpáta àgbàrànsaala. Wọn ní kìn ní ní dún yunmuyunmu, Tí ní kùn yunmuyumu L'óri àpáta àgbàrànsaala? Ọrúnmilà ní ọmọ ní ní dún yunmuyunmu, Ọmọ ní ní kùn yunmuyunmu L'óri àpáta àgbàrànsaala. Ọrúnmilà ní ẹ sílẹ̀kùn f'ólójó rere, K'ó wọlé wá.	25
Ọrúnmilà ní ní dún yunmuyunmu, Ó ní kùn yunmuyunmu L'óri àpáta àgbàrànsaala. Wọn ní kìn ní ní dún yunmuyunmu, Tí ní kùn yunmuyumu L'óri àpáta àgbàrànsaala? Wọn ní ikú ní ní dún yunmuyunmu, Ikú ní ní kùn yunmuyunmu L'óri àpáta àgbàrànsaala. Ọrúnmilà ní ewée didímonísàayùn, Ni yóò dí ikú nàà fún òun. Ọrúnmilà ní ewée didímonísàayùn Ni yóò dí àrùn nàà fún òun, Ni yóò dí òfò, ẹgbà, ẹse nàà fún òun. Ọrúnmilà ní ewée didímonísàayùn Ni yóò dí gbogbo Ajogun nàà fún òun. Ọrúnmilà, Bara, Àgbonmirègún, Ng ò pé o dinà ire. (W. Abimbólá, <i>Àwọn Ojú Odù Mèrèrèrindínlógún</i> 36)	30
Ọrúnmilà ní ní dún yunmuyunmu, Ó ní kùn yunmuyunmu L'óri àpáta àgbàrànsaala. Wọn ní kìn ní ní dún yunmuyunmu, Tí ní kùn yunmuyumu L'óri àpáta àgbàrànsaala? Wọn ní ikú ní ní dún yunmuyunmu, Ikú ní ní kùn yunmuyunmu L'óri àpáta àgbàrànsaala. Ọrúnmilà ní ewée didímonísàayùn, Ni yóò dí ikú nàà fún òun. Ọrúnmilà ní ewée didímonísàayùn Ni yóò dí àrùn nàà fún òun, Ni yóò dí òfò, ẹgbà, ẹse nàà fún òun. Ọrúnmilà ní ewée didímonísàayùn Ni yóò dí gbogbo Ajogun nàà fún òun. Ọrúnmilà, Bara, Àgbonmirègún, Ng ò pé o dinà ire. (W. Abimbólá, <i>Àwọn Ojú Odù Mèrèrèrindínlógún</i> 36)	35
Ọrúnmilà ní ní dún yunmuyunmu, Ó ní kùn yunmuyunmu L'óri àpáta àgbàrànsaala. Wọn ní kìn ní ní dún yunmuyunmu, Tí ní kùn yunmuyumu L'óri àpáta àgbàrànsaala? Wọn ní ikú ní ní dún yunmuyunmu, Ikú ní ní kùn yunmuyunmu L'óri àpáta àgbàrànsaala. Ọrúnmilà ní ewée didímonísàayùn, Ni yóò dí ikú nàà fún òun. Ọrúnmilà ní ewée didímonísàayùn Ni yóò dí àrùn nàà fún òun, Ni yóò dí òfò, ẹgbà, ẹse nàà fún òun. Ọrúnmilà ní ewée didímonísàayùn Ni yóò dí gbogbo Ajogun nàà fún òun. Ọrúnmilà, Bara, Àgbonmirègún, Ng ò pé o dinà ire. (W. Abimbólá, <i>Àwọn Ojú Odù Mèrèrèrindínlógún</i> 36)	40
Ọrúnmilà ní ní dún yunmuyunmu, Ó ní kùn yunmuyunmu L'óri àpáta àgbàrànsaala. Wọn ní kìn ní ní dún yunmuyunmu, Tí ní kùn yunmuyumu L'óri àpáta àgbàrànsaala? Wọn ní ikú ní ní dún yunmuyunmu, Ikú ní ní kùn yunmuyunmu L'óri àpáta àgbàrànsaala. Ọrúnmilà ní ewée didímonísàayùn, Ni yóò dí ikú nàà fún òun. Ọrúnmilà ní ewée didímonísàayùn Ni yóò dí àrùn nàà fún òun, Ni yóò dí òfò, ẹgbà, ẹse nàà fún òun. Ọrúnmilà ní ewée didímonísàayùn Ni yóò dí gbogbo Ajogun nàà fún òun. Ọrúnmilà, Bara, Àgbonmirègún, Ng ò pé o dinà ire. (W. Abimbólá, <i>Àwọn Ojú Odù Mèrèrèrindínlógún</i> 36)	45
Ọrúnmilà ní ní dún yunmuyunmu, Ó ní kùn yunmuyunmu L'óri àpáta àgbàrànsaala. Wọn ní kìn ní ní dún yunmuyunmu, Tí ní kùn yunmuyumu L'óri àpáta àgbàrànsaala? Wọn ní ikú ní ní dún yunmuyunmu, Ikú ní ní kùn yunmuyunmu L'óri àpáta àgbàrànsaala. Ọrúnmilà ní ewée didímonísàayùn, Ni yóò dí ikú nàà fún òun. Ọrúnmilà ní ewée didímonísàayùn Ni yóò dí àrùn nàà fún òun, Ni yóò dí òfò, ẹgbà, ẹse nàà fún òun. Ọrúnmilà ní ewée didímonísàayùn Ni yóò dí gbogbo Ajogun nàà fún òun. Ọrúnmilà, Bara, Àgbonmirègún, Ng ò pé o dinà ire. (W. Abimbólá, <i>Àwọn Ojú Odù Mèrèrèrindínlógún</i> 36)	50

Ọrúnmilà says it is very near,
It is closely at hand
On the rock of àgbàrànsaala.
They ask what is very near,
What is closely at hand
On the rock of àgbàrànsaala?
They say it is prosperity that is very near,
It is prosperity that is closely at hand

On the rock of <i>àgbàrànsaala</i> . <i>Ọ́rúnmílà</i> says open the door for it That the good fortune, owner of the day may come in.	10
<i>Ọ́rúnmílà</i> says it is very near, It is closely at hand On the rock of <i>àgbàrànsaala</i> . They ask what is very near, What is closely at hand	15
On the rock of <i>àgbàrànsaala</i> ? 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 <i>àgbàrànsaala</i> .	20
<i>Ọ́rúnmílà</i> says open the door for it That the good fortune, owner of the day may come in. <i>Ọ́rúnmílà</i> says it is very near, It is closely at hand On the rock of <i>àgbàrànsaala</i> .	25
They ask what is very near, What is closely at hand On the rock of <i>àgbàrànsaala</i> ? <i>Ọ́rúnmílà</i> says it is the good of children that is very near, It is the good of children that is closely at hand	30
On the rock of <i>àgbàrànsaala</i> . <i>Ọ́rúnmílà</i> says open the door for it That the good fortune, owner of the day may come in. <i>Ọ́rúnmílà</i> says it is imminent, It is closely at hand	35
On the rock of <i>àgbàrànsaala</i> . They ask what is imminent, What is closely at hand On the rock of <i>àgbàrànsaala</i> ? They say it is death that is imminent, It is death that is closely at hand	40
On the rock of <i>àgbàrànsaala</i> . <i>Ọ́rúnmílà</i> says the leaf of <i>dídímọ̀nísàayùn</i> Will shut the door of death for him. <i>Ọ́rúnmílà</i> says the leaf of <i>dídímọ̀nísàayùn</i> Will also shut the door of diseases for him; It will shut the doors of loss, paralysis and affliction for him.	45
<i>Ọ́rúnmílà</i> says the leaf of <i>dídímọ̀nísàayùn</i> Will shut the doors of all the <i>Ajogun</i> for him. <i>Ọ́rúnmílà, Bara, Àgbọ̀nmìrẹ̀gún,</i>	50
I did not ask you to shut the door of good fortune. ⁷	[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. Ọ́rúnmílà, 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 ñ bẹ nínú ibi; ibi ñ 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!⁸ 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 “problematicity”. 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 Odùwọ̀lé and Fáyẹ̀mí. 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 Odùwọ̀lé and Fáyẹ̀mí on the *philosophical* problem of evil in Yorùbá thought.

Notes

- ¹ A few notable examples are Idowu (*Olódùmarè*), Mbiti (*African Religions and Philosophy*), Awolalu (*Yorùbá Belief and Sacrificial Rites*), Bewaji ('Olódùmarè'), Dọpamu (*Esu*), Odùwólé ('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. ('*Ibi*').
- ² See Fáyẹmí ('*Ire and Ibi*') and Igboin ('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 Sartre 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, fallenness and death; Dostoevsky, whose concern is with the natural wickedness of human beings, above which he exonerates bestial cruelty; Sartre, whose emphasis is on nothingness and meaninglessness; Heidegger, whose emphasis is on facticities, thrownness, 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 *Àjẹ̀òfòlẹ̀*, *Ejìnrìn wẹwẹ̀*, and *Atapàrà* are all leaves that are believed to bear potent protective powers against misfortunes.
- ⁶ *Ètípọ̀n-ọ̀lá* is a leguminous plant that spreads over the earth.
- ⁷ *Bara* and *Àgbọ̀nmìrẹ̀gún*, are names of *Ọ̀rúnmilá*. The rock of *àgbàrànsaala* 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. *Dídímọ̀nísàayùn* 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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