# Why the Problem of Evil Might not be a Problem after all in African Philosophy of Religion

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**Abstract**
For decades, the problem of evil has occupied a centre stage in the Western philosophical discourse of the existence of God. The problem centres on the unlikelihood to reconcile the existence of an absolute and morally perfect God with the evidence of evil in the universe. This is the evidential problem of evil that has been a source of dispute among theists, atheists, agnostics, and sceptics. There seems to be no end to this dispute, making the problem of evil a perennial one in Western Philosophy of Religion. In this essay, I will contribute to this discourse from an African perspective. This essay, therefore, explores the evidential problem of evil within the African philosophy of religion. I argue that it is unlikely for the evidential problem of evil to be a problem in African philosophy of religion. I invoke an Ejima-based argument to support this claim. I conceptualize the Igbo word Ejima to metaphysically mean the inevitable coexistence of two opposite variables as complements to argue that God could be both good and evil within the African Traditional Religion, which explains why good and evil exist in the universe.
**Keywords:** God, evil, religion, African philosophy, Ejima

## Introduction

The problem of evil seems to centre on reconciling the existence of an All-powerful, All-knowing and Morally perfect God with the presence of evil in the world. If God is All-knowing, he would know about the evil in the world. If God is All-powerful, he would be able to prevent or eliminate all the evil in the world. If God is morally perfect, he would desire to eliminate evil. Why, then, do evil exist if there is an All-powerful, All-knowing and morally perfect God? It has been argued that the evidence of evil poses a significant challenge to the existence of an All-powerful, All-knowing and morally perfect God.

In this paper, I will focus on one form of this problem of evil- 'the evidential problem of evil'. Its argument claims that the facts or evidence of evil in the world makes it improbable or unlikely for an All-powerful, All-knowing and morally perfect God to exist. I will argue that the evidential problem of evil is unlikely a problem in African philosophy of religion. To

strengthen my argument, I will propose an Ejima-based argument to establish that both good and evil are complementary in the being of God, which, in turn, accounts for the existence of evil in the world. I will invoke the concept of "Ejima," to show that God is construed as a complementary being within the African traditional religion in whom both good and evil inevitably co-exist as complements. I further ascribe Ejima-attributes to God as being powerful, knowledgeable and morally good.

The paper begins with a conceptual clarification of the problem of evil and various formulations of the problem. A special attention is given to the evidential formulation of the problem. Finally, it will offer an Ejima-based argument to defend the unlikelihood of the problem of evil in African philosophy of religion.

## Conceptualizing the Problem of Evil

Within the Western theistic tradition, it has been argued that God must be a morally perfect entity or being or deity who is All-powerful (omnipotent), All-knowing (omniscient), and Morally perfect (omnibenevolent). In this sense, God denotes a being that is wholly and unlimitedly powerful, knowledgeable and good, all things considered. However, it has been argued that if such a being exists, then it becomes very unsettling that evil exists. For the world contains so many evils that could be eliminated or prevented by a merely powerful being. As it has been argued, a good person, given alternative possibilities to create the world, would choose the possibility that is best for the world, or would create a good world, as far as he could know the best course of action. In the case of a morally perfect God, whose attributes embrace absolute or maximum power, knowledge and moral goodness, and who knows the best course of action, given alternative possibilities, would inevitably choose the best for the world or create a good world. It then raises the question of why does the world contain evil if there is such a morally perfect God. This is the philosophical problem of evil.

The problem of evil in Western philosophy of religion centres on justifying, or reconciling, the existence of morally perfect God with the existence of evil. It entails that the world contains evil that could have been prevented or eliminated by a morally perfect God, where such a God exists. In the problem of evil, evil is seen as comprising both moral evil (those evils that result from human free will) and natural evil (those evils that arise from natural occurrences like earthquakes, diseases, hurricanes, floods) (see MADDEN & HARE 1968, 6). It attempts to prove that the existence of moral and natural evils makes it unlikely or impossible for a morally perfect God to exist. In his book, [God and Evil: An Introduction to the Issue] (1998), Michael L. Peterson chronicles some of these evils in human history thus:

> Something is dreadfully wrong with our world. An earthquake kills hundreds in Peru. A pancreatic cancer patient suffers prolonged, excruciating pain and dies. A pit bull attacks a two-year-old child, angrily ripping his flesh and killing him. Countless multitudes suffer

the ravages of war in Somalia. A crazed cult leader pushes eighty-five people to their deaths in Waco, Texas. Millions starve and die in North Korea as famine ravages the land. Horrible things of all kinds happen in our world—and that has been the story since the dawn of civilization. (PETERSON 1998, 1)

In the above, Peterson claims that the history of human civilization is replete with horrific evils that provide some grounds that makes it reasonable to question the existence of a morally perfect God. He argues that the problem of evil is a form of "moral protest," which poses the questions of "[h]ow could God let this happen?" and "[i]t is not fair that God has let this happen" (PETERSON 1998, 9). Such a 'moral protest' implies that the world is a product of an absolute and morally perfect being, yet the world contains evil.

Indeed, an absolute and morally perfect God can create a world free of any evils. An ancient Greek philosopher, Epicurus, conceptualizes this problem when he asserts that "Is [God] willing to prevent evil, but not able? then is he impotent. Is he able, but not willing? then is he malevolent. Is he both able and willing? whence then is evil?" (quoted from HUME 1779, 186). Epicurus' assertion suggests that either the God who exists is a morally perfect being or He does not exist. While the first disjunct would commit the theist to admit that God is limited in power, knowledge and goodness, the second disjunct would commit them to deny the existence of an absolute and morally perfect God in the face of evil. It has been argued that admitting either of these disjuncts would allow the theists to avoid the problem of evil. But for the theists, as H. D. Aiken (1958) pointed out, to admit either of these disjuncts would be to require them to "renounce [their] profoundest loyalties, to cease, that is, to be the very person [they are]." Yet, failing to admit either of these disjuncts would be an "offense to reason and thus to the human spirit itself" (AIKEN 1958).

Furthermore, reflection on the problem of evil does suggest that it has been formulated in two different ways: either as an evidential (or inductive or probabilistic) formulation that posits that the fact of evil in the world makes it unlikely for a morally perfect God to exist; or logical (or deductive) formulation that asserts that the existence of evil is logically inconsistent with the existence of a morally perfect God. In the rest of this paper, I will concentrate on the evidential formulation of the problem of evil. It posits that if the world contains evil that God would neither create nor sustain, it seems unlikely or improbable for a morally perfect God who exists to create such a world. Consequently, the evidence of evil we find in this world would seem to justify the belief that God does not exist (see PIKE 1963; MARTIN 1978; ROWE 1979, 1991,1996; WYKSTRA 1984; ADAMS & SUTHERLAND 1989; DRAPER 1989; ALMEIDA & OPPY 2003; TOOLEY 2008; VAN INWAGEN 2014; BENTON et al. 2016; PERRINE 2021). According to the strongest sense of evidential formulation, the mere existence of evil in the world makes it unlikely or probable for God to exist. Michael Martin has argued that "[t]here is no positive evidence for belief in God that could

outweigh the negative evidence" (MARTIN 1978, 430). The assumption here is that there is something in the world created by a morally perfect God that is evil, making it unlikely for such a being to exist.

However, the weak sense of the evidential formulation of the problem attempts to establish that the world contains some quantity or intensity of evil that provides evidence to doubt the existence of a morally perfect God. Rowe (1979) argues that the intensity and great frequency of human and animal sufferings provide evidence against the existence of a morally perfect God. While he agrees with the theists that some suffering is tied to the greater good, which could not be realized without such suffering, he argues that the severity and great plenitude of human and animal suffering make it unlikely that all instances of evil are connected to greater good that would be lost without such evil. As he argues:

> (1) There exist instances of intense suffering which an omnipotent, omniscient being could have prevented without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse.

> (2) An omniscient, wholly good being would prevent the occurrence of any intense suffering it could, unless it could not do so without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse.

> (3) [Therefore] there does not exist an omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good being. (ROWE 1979, 336)

From the above, Rowe seems to argue that the probability that a morally perfect God does not exist, given the existence of evil, is higher than the probability that he does exist. The evidential argument raises three issues. The first is whether the severity and prevalence of evil is comparable with the quantity of good the world contains (or does evil outweigh good in the world). The second is whether the evil the world contains provides contrary evidence for the existence of a morally perfect God. The third is whether there are evils that would have been eliminated or prevented by a morally perfect God without losing a greater good or allowing an equal or greater evil.

The evidential formulation of the problem of evil has long been debated by theists, atheists, agnostics, and sceptics, which makes the problem of evil an enduring one in Western philosophy of religion (See for e.g., MCBRAYER & HOWARD-SNYDER 2013; PETERSON 2017). However, I do not intend to philosophically engage with the numerous arguments on the evidential formulation of the problem of evil within the Western philosophy of religion because of the paper's limited space. Instead, I will focus my attention on showing that the evidential formulation of the problem of evil might not be a problem in the African philosophy of religion. In the next section, I will employ a new idea of Ejima-based argument teased out of Jonathan Chimakonam's (2019) Ezumezu logic to justify this claim.

**An argument for the unlikelihood of the evidential problem of evil in African Philosophy of Religion**

In this section, I claim that it is unlikely for the evidential problem of evil to be a problem in African philosophy of religion. So, an argument for this claim is needed. I will argue that the complementary role played by both good and evil in African traditional religion renders this claim true. To explain precisely why this is so, I will introduce the concept of "Ejima." Ejima is an Igbo word meaning 'twins' (see AWDE et al. 1999, 37; ECHERUO 2001, 45). This is, however, the ordinary meaning of the term. I will conceptualize the word "Ejima" to metaphysically mean the inevitable coexistence of two opposite variables as complements. The logical basis for this conceptualization is the Ezumezu logic (CHIMAKONAM 2019). Ezumezu logic grounds the harmonious coexistence of seemingly opposed variables like good and evil. Given this technical use of the term Ejima, the necessary and sufficient condition for a being to be God is that it is a complementary being in whom both good and evil inevitably co-exist as complements. What is implied here is that good and evil systematically contribute to the being of God within the African religious context. Another way to put this is to say that a complementary being is the origin of both good and evil. Examples are the trickster gods Ekwensu, Esu and Marcardit found in Igbo, Yoruba and Sudan Dinka traditional religions that are both good and evil (see ABIMBOLA 1982, 27; OPATA 2005; WETHMAR 2006, 257). As a first approximation, we may say that a God C is a 'complementary being' just in case for some action Y that C plains to will, a broad range of both potential good and bad outcomes might arise depending on the context of his action. We can observe that to be a complementary being in this sense does not entail being morally perfect. Notice also that the being of God is made up of both attributes of good and evil.

Additionally, the complementary being of God has what I call "contextual utility." I will say that the complementary being of God is contextually useful just in case that he casually contributes to the preservation of the best interest of humans. It has been argued that African traditional religion is human-centred. In other words, God and other primordial divinities have the sole purpose of safeguarding humanity. Dominic Zahan has shown that "…all of African spiritual life is based on this vision of man's situation and role." He has also shown that "[i]t is not to please God or out of love for God that the African prays, implores or makes sacrifice but rather to become himself and to realize the order in which he finds himself implicated" (ZAHAN 1970, 5). This point is very forceful in the work of Udobata Onunwa, who emphasizes that:

> The African traditional religion affirms that the human life is superior to any other created in the cosmos. Man is the Supreme irreducible reality. The divinity itself enters human affairs in the same way as do other beings which man is close to and uses. This underlines the importance of the Homo sapiens in the religious

context. Even the deity is meant to serve human interests.
(ONUNWA 2011, 43-44)

In the above quotation, Onunwa stresses the role of humans in African
traditional religion. He acknowledges that God and his divinities exist to serve
human's purpose on earth. Chimakonam and Ogbonnaya (2015, 281) have
also argued that "…the worship of deity among the Igbo is rooted or linked to
the well-being of the human being or the preservation of human life. Humans
strive to appeal to other spiritual beings, such as Chukwu and other deities in
order for these beings to serve their own needs." Thus, it can be argued that
many Africans worship God insofar as He guarantees their best interest. The
point thus far is that God's complementary being is contextually useful when
he casually contributes to the good of humanity. Consider, for example, a
scenario where a brother-in-law Q unjustly takes his late brother's widow P
piece of farmland to cultivate it in the next farming season. During the farming
season, P sacrifices to Ala (Igbo goddess for fertility) to plead that the
farmland becomes unproductive as justice to the injustice she received from Q.
At the same time, Q offers sacrifices and prays to Ala to make the land very
fertile and more productive. Imagine also that during the harvest season, Q
found out that insect pests have destroyed all his yams in the field. Q's
suffering, in this case, was contextually useful. For it casually contributed to
P's best interest, namely, justice. Both good and evil within the African
traditional religion are contextually useful in this sense. Given the contextual
utility of God's complementary being, the claim that the mere existence of evil
in the world provides evidence that makes it unlikely for God to exist would
be defeated. Thus, since God's being is such that both good and evil inevitably
co-exist harmoniously, then the good and evil in the world are various
manifestations of his complementary being for the best interest of humanity.

One might want to question why such a complementary being would
not want to eliminate evil, making the world a most pleasant place to live.
While it might be argued that the world would be better off without some
evils, one begins to doubt whether it would be the same with the absence of all
evils. Thus, it might be argued that absolutely eliminating all evils would still
not make the world a better place, for evil complements good required to
preserve human's best interest. Some actions that seem to result in evil
outcomes are also the same ones that would result in good outcomes. As John
Harris (2010, 104) observes, "the sorts of traits or dispositions that seem to
lead to wickedness or immorality are also the very same ones required not
only for virtue but for any sort of moral life at all."

To further address the evidential problem of evil, we need to
distinguish between what can be called 'absolute attributes' and Ejima
attributes. While absolute attributes are qualities from the extreme side of the
spectrum, Ejima attributes are the complementarity of attributes from both
sides of the spectrum. What is implied is that while absolute attributes present
God as possessing only the positive qualities to an unlimited degree, Ejima
attributes present God as harmoniously possessing both positive and negative

qualities. For instance, Absolute attributes ascribe to God qualities of omnipotence, omniscience and omnibenevolence. Omnipotence is essentially the ability to do whatever one wills without external constraints. Thus, in speaking of God as omnipotent, one is saying that God possesses unlimited power to accomplish whatever he will. Omniscience signifies that God is an infallible being that would know everything, including yesterday, today, and tomorrow. And as omnibenevolence, God would be a morally perfect being that inevitably does only good. God becomes an inevitable perfect being possessing an absolute maximum of power, knowledge and goodness, and so incapable of limitation with the absolute attributes.

In contrast, Ejima attributes present God as being powerful, knowledgeable, and morally good. First, in African traditional religion, the power of God is understood not as being able to do everything but as the expression of the complementary being of God. Indeed, granting that the power of God is the expression of his complementary being, it is not all power that is ascribed to him. There is separation of powers between God and other primordial divinities in African traditional religion. This separation of powers does not imply that the divinities exercise their powers independently, rather it implies that they exercise their powers in conjunction with God's approval. According to Oguntola (2000, 16), each of these divinities "has wielded power in his or her own area of competence and jurisdiction. They act as agents of social control and by which conducts of individuals and the community is regulated. This they did in conjunction with Olodumare [God in Yoruba traditional religion]. Thus, we can say that there is a sort of harmonious interaction between Olodumare and his ministers." God is seen as having the highest power followed by his divinities and other entities such as ancestors, man, and material objects. For instance, in Igbo traditional religion, the divinity Ala has the power of fertility, and in Yoruba traditional religion, the divinity Obatala exercises the power of creation.

Second, in the African traditional religion, God is not All-knowing conceived as knowing everything, but he is knowledgeable. This point has been captured by G. S. Sogolo (1993, 14), who maintains that "[God] knows more than we do, but unlike the 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 this sense, God in African traditional religion could be both knowledgeable and ignorant since he does not know everything.

Thirdly, African traditional religion regards God as morally good and not morally perfect. By being morally good, God does not inevitably do what is good. Moreover, as a morally good God, he is liable to moral praise and blame. Moral blameworthiness is shown through what I call religious abandonment ─ construed as forsaking a

god(s) that falls to act in the best interest of humans. In African traditional religions, worship and sacrifice are often withdrawn from a god who fails to deliver. Ogbu Kalu succinctly explains that through worship, Africans "variously plead with patron gods, placate the angry and evil spirits, and end up by threatening any deity that if he failed to perform, his grove and shrine will be overgrown with weeds" (KALU 1978, 42 quoted in ONUNWA 2011, 46). However, moral praiseworthiness is expressed through continued worship, sacrifice and adoration of God. This insistence on distinguishing the absolute attributes to which extreme qualities apply from Ejima attributes to which complementary qualities apply takes us a step further in understanding why the evidential problem of evil might not be a problem in African philosophy of religion.

My conception of God is in terms of Ejima attributes rather than absolute attributes. Moreover, the Ejima attributes entail the complementary being of God. Fundamentally, this shift from absolute attributes to Ejima attributes implies that the evidential problem of evil is unlikely a problem in African philosophy of religion.  This is contrary to the popular position held by some scholars, like John Mbiti (1969, 1970), Bolaji Idowu (1962), John Bewaji (1998), Ebunoluwa Oduwole (2007), who ascribe absolute attributes to God. For instance, while Bewaji avoids the attributes of omnipotence, omniscience and omnibenevolence, he employs other absolute attributes such as "greatest knowledge", "most powerful" to describe God. He claims that these qualities account for the coexistence of such a being and evil in the world. The apparent implications of these attributes, which Bewaji tends to deny, is that God having the greatest knowledge would mean that he possesses unlimited knowledge of whatever there is, and God being most powerful would mean that he possesses unlimited power and that nothing else has power over him. When these attributes are seen in this light, it becomes difficult for one to fully understand the force of his conclusion that the problem of evil is non-existent in African traditional religion.

Similarly, Oduwole presents God in African traditional religion as a "Supreme" or "Ultimate" Deity who is omnipotent, omniscient and omnibenevolent (ODUWOLE 2007, 5). By ascribing absolute attributes, Oduwole generates the problem of evil in African philosophy of religion. She then concludes that "the philosophical problem of evil is a   universal one.  Regardless of race, culture, or tradition, as long as one believes in a Supreme or Ultimate Being who has the attributes earlier mentioned and as long as we accept that evil is not an illusion, the problem exists" (ODUWOLE 2007, 13).

Why Oduwole claims that the problem of evil is a problem in African philosophy of religion is because she ascribes absolute attributes to God. And there is a problem attached to absolute attributes in which God is construed as being totally and inevitably perfect. But her conception of God with absolute attributes is clearly Judeo-Christian rather than African in structure. This error is likely due to her Judeo-Christian upbringing and

influence. If absolute attributes entail that a being is All-powerful, All-knowing, and Morally perfect, then the coexistence and interdependence of God and other divinities in African traditional religion would be otiose. This harmonious relationship between God and other divinities, exemplified in terms of interconnectedness and interdependence, shows that God is not omnipotent, omniscient and morally perfect. Instead, as Ejima attributes show, God is powerful for he admits weakness, knowledgeable for he admits ignorance, and morally good for he could be morally evil. Besides being African in structure,[1] there seems to be a genuine advantage of accepting the Ejima attributes of God in preference to that of the absolute attributes. Ejima attributes do not rule out God's powerfulness, knowledgeableness, and goodness but rule out the absoluteness of these qualities, thereby making God capable of limitation that complements his being.

An objection might be raised here that if God is stripped of all absoluteness, he will no longer be an appropriate object of worship. It might further be objected that omnipotence, omniscience and omnibenevolence are "necessary and sufficient conditions" for a being to be God (see DRAPER 1989, 331), and that conceiving God outside these absolute attributes raises the problem of "sustaining religious attitude of worship and adoration for a being who is imperfect" (MCCLOSKEY 1962, 188). However, this objection would be significantly flawed considering that God construed with these absolute attributes reflects our limitation. From our suffering and pain springs the idea of a morally perfect God; from our ignorance, we conceive an All-knowing God; and from our weakness, we idealize an All-powerful God. As Henry D. Aiken remarks:

> The point is that "omniscience" primarily represents the overcoming of our own deprivation of knowledge or, rather, the ideal overcoming of this deprivation. As such it signifies an ideal of knowledgeability to which we ourselves conceivably may aspire and which we may endlessly approach. Similarly, "omnipotence" represents an ideal of power or puissance, of ability to do and to accomplish whatever one may will, without external interferences of any kind. Both characteristics are ascribed to God as inverse symbols and measures of our own imperfections and limitations. (AKEIN 1958, 81)

Moreover, when God is construed without these absolute attributes, he would not cease to be an entity that is appropriate for worship. If one understands God as a complementary being, then worshipping him would not be a problem

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[1] Both the logic and ontology of African lifeworld have been articulated as complementary and harmonious rather than divisive and hylomorphous (see CHIMAKONAM 2019; CHIMAKONAM & OGBONNAYA 2021).

since his being is the harmonious embodiment of power and weakness, knowledge and ignorance, moral goodness and evil.

Let us now return to the evidential problem of evil and reconsider it in light of Ejima attributes. If we grant that God is powerful, knowledgeable, and morally good, would we make any progress on the evidential problem of evil? My answer is in the affirmative. As outlined above, the evidential problem of evil is based on the unlikelihood or improbability of an omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent God to co-exist with the fact of evil in the world. It has been claimed that the suffering and pain experienced in the world make it improbable for a morally perfect God to exist. This problem persists in western philosophy of religion because God is understood in absolute attributes as having unlimited power, knowledge and moral goodness. However, this problem would likely not be a problem in the African philosophy of religion. Since God is understood with Ejima attributes as having power, knowledge and moral goodness, he harmoniously co-exists with evil. Evil is not understood as a negation of good but as a complement of good. This is what I call "complementary moral value." For instance, in Igbo traditional religion, it is believed that Chukwu (God) created humans with Chi (a spirit being), which could be good (oma) and evil (ojo) depending on the possessor (see CHUKWUKERE 1983; EJIZU 1992). Within the Yoruba traditional religion, it is also believed that the creator (Obatala) created the world with both good and evil (Tibi tire ni adaniwaye da ile aye), which explains why humans live with both evil and goodness in the world (Tibi tire ni eda nri ni ile aye) (See ODUWOLE 2007; FAYEMI 2012).

Another objection that might be raised at this point is that in traditional African religion, it is believed that divinities, spirits and humans are the cause of evil in the world and that evil does not originate from God. This point is clearly stated by Oduwole (2007, 7) thusly; "[T]he Yoruba will not feel comfortable to accept that evil is a creation of God, it will even be inconsistent with his attributes, especially with his goodness. They may want to accept, however that evil is a creation of the deities and various supernatural forces, such as of magical forces and witches." A plausible response to this criticism would be that since God permits these divinities to run the affairs of the universe with him, their actions are in consonance with his. I have established above that there is a harmonious interaction between God's highest power and those of the divinities in the sense that God approves the actions of the divinities. God's approval of their actions can entail that both evil and good inevitably co-exist in him as complements.

**Conclusion**

In this paper, I invoked an Ejima-based argument to claim that the evidential problem of evil might not be a problem in African philosophy of religion after all. With the Ejima-based argument, I have shown that African philosophy of religion establishes the following plausible claims: (a)    There is a complementary being in whom good and evil co-exist as complements; (b)

such a complementary being is powerful, knowledgeable and morally good; (c) there are instances of evil in the world which a complementary being could allow; (d) a complementary being would allow those instances of evil since both good and evil inevitably and harmoniously co-exist as modes of his being; (e) therefore, there can exist a complementary being called God whose existence is not vitiated by the evidence of evil in the universe.

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