

An Assessment of Evil (Ibi) and Goodness (Ire) In Yoruba Philosophical Thought

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Abstract

This paper investigated the concept of evil (*ibi*) and goodness (*ire*) in Yoruba philosophical thought that they are real phenomena. Attempts have been made to solve the visible absurdity in the coexistence of God and evil. Contradictions between evil and good in the world revealed that; world cannot exist without good and evil. The intrinsic, importance, philosophical implications and moral responsibilities of evil and good among humans are real. However, this paper: examined the concept of evil and good in Yoruba philosophical thought; juxtaposed Yoruba and Western philosophical views on evil and goodness; established that evil and good are part of life. It was also established that God created evil but was brought upon human through disobedience. This paper solved these problems: inadequate knowledge of people about the problem of evil; bridging the gap between the Western and African philosophy on the concept of evil and good. 600 questionnaires were distributed to Christians, Islamic and Traditional religion in Mushin LGA. Simple percentage method was used to analyze the data collected. Charles Sander's fallibilism theory was adopted as the theoretical framework, which suggested that "long and widely accepted beliefs can be wrong". Result revealed that: Western and African perception on evil and good are the same; without evil, goodness cannot exist; destiny decides one's evil and good in life. This paper concluded/recommended that God created evil and good but Satan is the carrier of evil, and God is benevolent and not to be blamed. However, humans should stop doing evil to attract goodness from God.

Keywords: Evil, Goodness, Western, Yoruba, Philosophical thought

Introduction

There have been controversial issues on the nature of the existence of evil (*ibi*), goodness (*ire*) and the attribute of God in Yoruba philosophical thought. This has led to several metaphysical interpretations which have been given by various African philosophers on the meaning, nature and problem of evil (*ibi*) and good (*ire*) in Yoruba traditional thought. Some of these interpretations agreed with fatalism, freewill and determinism, even hard determinism. In view of this philosophical account, this paper is to: establish the concept of evil (*ibi*) and goodness (*ire*) in Yoruba philosophical thought; examine western philosophical view with Yoruba philosophical thought; provide a philosophical justification for the concept of evil (*ibi*) and goodness (*ire*); establish the fact that both evil (*ibi*) and good (*ire*) are part of human existence in our lives and they are to complement each other; establish that Yoruba belief in multiple causes



(determinant), in that, the occurrence of evil (*ibi*) and good (*ire*) on earth cannot altar the identity of God.

It is to be noted that the idea of evilness (*ibi*) and goodness (*ire*) are interrelated concepts; it is a contemporary and highly controversial old concepts as humankind. Evil (*ibi*) and good (*ire*) have their own philosophical concept as they keep occurring in human daily existence. In Africa, different names and meanings are given to the occurrence of evil (*ibi*) and good (*ire*) in the society; Yoruba in particular, even attach their own personal importance to it. Yoruba believes that evilness and goodness cannot happen to human without a cause and such cause might either be from Olodumare (Supreme Being), Deity (small gods) like “Ogun”, “Oya”, “Obatala”, “Esu” “Sanpanna” e.t.c., *Ayanma* (Destiny), Oruko (Name), *Iwa* (Character), *Curse* (egun), *Ese* (Sin) and so on. In the philosophical thought of Yoruba on the occurrence of evil (*ibi*) and good (*ire*), while some thoughts are the same with other African tribes, others are only similar but not really the same. However, one can say that the thoughts are interwoven.

Some African tribes reason in a like manner with Yoruba, some western philosophers and theologians as well reasoned the same way. Though some thought are similar on a cursory look, but the various religions of the world coupled with the fact that there are different beliefs as regards to those religions, people also believe in different things about the Deity. Theists for instance truthfully believe in one personal God; the Hindus believe in many gods like the Yoruba. There are monotheists, and polytheists as adherents, this makes their reasons not to be equal. Thus, it is crucial to specifically make the concepts of evil and good independently.

Statement of the Problem:

It is quite painful that the world is full of evil (*Ibi*), many people find it so uneasy to believe that God exists, and many have lost their faith to become atheist due to pains. Those professing that God exists are not finding it easy to live because of unjustifiable cause of evil they are experiencing. With this, philosophers have worked on the discourse concerning problems of evil, yet a definite solution has not been provided. Today, contrary to human experience, many people are of the notion that God; being all-powerful, all-knowing and all-good, should not permit evil to exist among the people. This has led to controversies among different people in the world. Contrary to this general view, Yoruba’s believe is that evil and good exist simultaneously and co-existed from creation. This study seeks to examine the role of evil and goodness within the Yoruba philosophical tradition in order to understand its implications for the people.

Justification of the Study:

This paper: provides solutions to people’s confusion, wrong view or misconception about the problem of evil from the Yoruba perspectives; bridges gap between Western’s and African’s views about the concept of evil and goodness; offers knowledge about intrinsic values of evil in human nature, particularly, from the Yoruba perspective; and serves as a resource material for religious bodies and scholars to educate people on the problem of evil.



Literature Review:

Evil (*Ibi*) and Goodness (*Ire*) are Inevitable in Human Existence

Mackie (1955) defines evil as the opposite of good. It is what is morally wrong, sinful, destructive, corruptive, fallible and wicked that can come from natural circumstances, metaphysical and moral. More so, Onwuegbusi (2009) notes that: anything opposite to goodness constitutes misfortunes, suffering of all kinds, difficulty, sorrow, diseases or woe. Plato (1937) affirmed that, goodness is being positive or desirable in nature: not bad or poor, having the qualities that are desirable or distinguishing in a particular thing. Plato refers to goodness as value in general, and of which moral virtue is only a particular instance, goodness is greater than justice and the other virtues. In human existence, this paper sees evil (*ibi*) and goodness (*ire*) as inevitable substances in life. Take note of this, that in our daily endeavours, some activities are expected of us that are apparently inevitable because such activities must have an end product that will determine our fate or mood, either to rejoice or to be sad. If it is to rejoice, then, it means that the product of such activities is good (*ire*). However, if it is to be sad, it means, the product of such activities is evil (*ibi*). Be that as it may, this makes the words evil and goodness become inevitable in the life of every human as long as he/she lives or exists (Oshitelu, 2012)

Spurred on by Arendt's work and dissatisfied with analysis of evil found in the history of philosophy, several theories over decades have sought to offer necessary and sufficient conditions for the existence of evil (Arendt 1994, p.14). Some theories focus on evil character, or evil personhood, as the root concept of evil. These theories consider the concept of evil action to be a derivative concept (Calder 2013, p. 177). Those theories define an evil action as the sort of action that an evil person performs. But just as many theories, or more, believe that the concept of evil action is the root concept of evil. These theories consider the concept of evil personhood to be a derivative concept, which means, an evil person is defined as someone who is prone to perform evil actions. Some theories believe that evil action is the root concept and that only one or two component properties are essential for evil action, while others believe that evil action has a multitude of essential components. Gavin (2019) reveals some Western philosophers who have worked on the problem of evil. In his book; "evil in the Western philosophical tradition", he revealed: St. Augustine, with his work "Free Will and Evil; Aquinas, "Privation, and Original Sin; Descartes, "the Evil of Error"; Leibniz, "Evil as the Good".

Augustine's view on evil was based on the fact that, there cannot be good without bad. Augustine pressed further by saying; many people do say that evil is a necessary part of the world, also people argued to this claim that, there cannot be good without bad. Such is a metaphysical idea about the structure of reality. Part of the idea is that, everything in existence must co-exist in a sort of symmetry (Kooy 2007, p.12 & 13). This Augustinian perception showcased that both evil and good are inseparable in nature to life and existence and are on equivalent basis in life. Plato's theory of evil is on the three psyche, he opined that; the psyche of a human being has three components. The first is composed of sensual desires such as: hunger, pleasure, and lust. The second part is the spirit or will. The third component is the intellect, which uses reason to obtain knowledge and guides the obtained knowledge in order to guide the other two parts. The sense is that: when one fails to develop his intellect or spirit, the sensual part of his soul will dominate his life. Such will be a slave to appetite and this will induce evil behaviour (Joseph,



2012). From the Platonic three psyche theory of evil, it is possible that both evil and good can be gained from one ‘sensual desire’, ‘spirit or will’ and ‘intellect’. The reason is that, either they (three psyche) are properly guided or not, there must be an end product which is good or evil. The point is that, the resultant effect of such act determines the end product of the person. Still, evil and good are inseparable.

Kant (2010) developed his theory of evil among various theories on evil; Kant’s theory was the first to be secular as it does not attribute its existence with the divine. Also, no intention of making this theory a response to specific forms of evil acts, and his theory was created through reflection of human nature and does not take the approach of theodicy. This Kant’s theory was mainly based on “the bad principle existing alongside the good, that is, the radical evil in human nature”. Kant begins by saying “world was with evil, this also agreed with religion that the world began in a good state, religious testimonies, past history, golden age, life in Eden, or understanding with celestial beings. Kant’s view is that when an action is claimed to be by nature it means it is not free, implying the action is neither morally good nor evil. This fact is verifiable at the philosophical arena that; many people do claim that evil is a necessary being walking with human daily that can never be outwit because nature may cause it at any time. This Kantian’s theory still revealed that evil and good are still not inseparable.

This paper provides some of the reasons why everything in the world or existence must co-exist’ and why it is possible that evil and good are inseparable as it has been divinely ordained. Yoruba believe this also in their world view, cultural practices, and linguistic display through proverbs, tales, and communication. The reason is that, everything in existence needs the help of another to coexist. Ussher (2023) through "research enthusiast" answered a question on: why does everything in existence need an opposite to coexist? He said; because it is not only one thing that exists. Meaning that, evil does not exist for itself, nor good does exist for itself but they (evil and good) exist for each other. A blogger, Jake Thompson supported Augustinian concept, that: nothing in nature lives for itself; river do not drink their own water, trees do not eat their own fruit, the sun does not shine for itself, flower do not spread fragrance for themselves, living for others is the rule of nature (Jake Thompson, blogger). Victor Hugo, (1862, p.439) declares that "man lives than bread", this occurs in man’s humanitarian service to nature. He further opined that:

“All roads are blocked to a philosophy which reduces everything to the word ‘no.’ To ‘no’ there is only one answer and that is ‘yes.’ Nihilism has no substance. There is no such thing as nothingness, and zero does not exist. Everything is something. Nothing is nothing. Man lives more by affirmation than by bread”.

The notion is that, evil exist for the purpose of good. Both evil and good are necessary for humanity. At long run, this analogy establishes Yoruba perceptions about good and evil in their metaphysical senses.

In Yoruba Philosophical thought, it is believed that "*tibi tire la da ileaye*". Many African scholars, most especially Yoruba philosophers wrote and believe on this. like: Oluwaseyiin Asiri Oro: *Tibi tire* - the manifestation of duality, opined that: Ifá teaches us that *tíbitìrẹ̀ la da Ile aye* - meaning reality was birthed on the principle of the complementary of two opposing forces ‘negative and positive’ (Oluwaseyi 2022,p.1). He further buttresses his point on "evil vs good",



by saying: good and evil are taken as opposites, eternally at war with each other. Good and evil are taken as parallel lines with no relation and intersection. In various ways, you can be one thing and not the other. This concept can also be observed in other aspects of existence in today's world. An aspect of this, is how we relate between what is considered 'right and wrong', 'positive and negative', 'truth and false' (Oluwaseyi 2022, p.2). In Oduwole (2018, p.28) analytical exposition into Yoruba concept of evil and good, affirmed that: the age long problem of evil is non-existing and assumes a dialectical explanation in the Yoruba thought system. Meaning that, Yoruba practically, culturally, and religiously belief affirmed the co-existence of *ibi* (evilness) and *ire* (goodness) in the world without any contradiction. In Yoruba, it is strongly believed that both evil and good are best of friends from heaven and they are still walking together while on earth. Actually, this might have made Oduwole (2018, p.28) to affirm that:

“The Yoruba conception of theoretic hierarchy shows how they consequently react to the problem of evil and how it is consistent with the concept of God”.

It is interesting and apparently logical to know that both evil and good are not religiously inclined. As both evil and good can happen to any religious person, so they can happen to a non-religious person. Nyarko, (2020, p. 22) partially supported this assertion on the aspect of evilness and not goodness that: “evil does not necessarily have a religious connotation among the Yoruba thought but a matter of morality, therefore, evil cannot be blamed on God”. Here, this paper is on the opinion that, if evil cannot be only blamed on God, definitely, good should neither be applauded of God, nor be blamed either, simply because, both evil and good are products of morality. Ingram, (1986, p.148) notes that: “moral relativism holds that standards of good and evil are only products of local culture, custom, or prejudice”.

Yoruba Traditional Concept of Causality on *Ibi* and *Ire*

The concept of causality is very central to the Yoruba traditional thought and religion. Every event has a cause. The Yoruba concept of God is a reflection of the Yoruba social hierarchical structure, and just like the King 'Oba' are at the apex of this social structure, so also is Olodumare the creator. Olodumare brought the divinities into being, and they have different purposes from Yoruba traditional creation story. Olodumare is immortal and both ritually and immorally holy in Yoruba belief (Bewaji 1998, p.2). Yoruba believed that through these divinities and some other natural factors (metaphysical in nature) evil (*ibi*) and goodness (*ire*) enter into human existence. Yoruba equally believed that evil (*ibi*) and goodness (*ire*) can be removed from human live and existence through intervention of divinities. Oshitelu (2010) attests to this fact that, Esu, one of the existing divinities, is the most ubiquitous of all divinities (*Orisa*) to which a priest or priestess is attached.

From Yoruba traditional perspective, it is believed that these natural factors mentioned below can cause evil (*ibi*) and goodness (*ire*) in life. They are: *ori* (inner-head) which performs a metaphysical function that determines one's choice of life on earth that is, evil or goodness (Makinde 1983), destiny known as: *Ayanmo* (Olatubi 2024, p.54), *Ipin* (lot or portion), *Kadara* (fortune) (Olalekan 2022), and *Akosejaye* (foretelling) (Olaleye 2014). Fashina, advised people that the theory of *Ayanmo* is useful in the explanation of inexplicable human conditions. It is also a psychological tool that teaches everyone to imbibe the ethics and principles of moral balance,



whereby human beings are not to be discouraged and overly disappointed when goal or target for which they had put in their best possible becomes a story of futility. He further affirmed that, *Ipin* is that aspect of destiny that is assigned to a person by the Supreme Being and Creator of the universe (Fashina 2009). *Ìwà* (Character) is another natural factors that Yoruba believed that it is capable of bringing out both evil (*ibi*) and goodness (*ire*) because Yoruba says *ìwàlèwà ènià* (character is the beauty of a person) (Oyeleye2014). On the part of name *Orúko*, Yoruba believed that *orúko ló nroni* (name speaks for someone) either to both evil (*ibi*) and goodness (*ire*) part. *Èbọ tàbí Ìrúbọ* (sacrifice) is another factor that can bring about evil or goodness in life. Though Olatubi opined that *Èbọ tàbí Ìrúbọ* is a panacea to evil (*ibi*) and an activator of goodness (*ire*) in Yoruba philosophical thought. He said this because Yoruba says: *rírú èbọ ní ngbeni, àírú èbọ kígbènià* (Olatubi 2016, p.75). *Ègúntàbí Èpè* and *Ire tàbí Ìwúre*, in Yoruba traditional philosophy, even biblically too, these two things are believed that they are equally capable of orchestrating evil and goodness to one's life (Genesis 27, Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau. Also, Jacob blessed Ephraim and Manasseh in Genesis 48). Secret societies like: witch (*Àjé*), wizard (*osó*), fraternity (*ògbóni*), deity (*orò*), masquerade and (*egúngún*), Yoruba traditionalists believed these groups are inventors of both evil and goodness. The type of evil they perpetuated can be grouped under metaphysical and moral evil. Meanwhile, people believe that their goodness are not intrinsically good but forceful, pretentious, circumstantial and conditional. These groups are called secret society, established for solidarity, protection, safety, and well – being of the people and their members. Awolalu & Dopamu (2005) opine that; they are secret in the sense that membership is usually restricted and they often engage in mysterious activities.

The Arguments in Favour of God's Existence on the Occurrence of Evil in the World

This paper is using Friedrich Nietzsche's argument on the concept of evil as a yardstick for submission that, in both western and African (Yoruba) perception on the concept of evil and goodness. It will be wise, if humans can generally accept and believe that developing an argument on problem of evil against the existence of God is bad. This shows that, humans are ingrate and insatiable element in nature. The reason is that, God who created both evil and good meant well-being and happiness (eudemonism) for the existence and life. However, life will be deficient with the absence of one out of the two elements (evil or good). Metaphysically, both evil and good are morally and naturally inseparable in nature from creation. Human should separate the occurrence of evil from the existence of God, as the two concepts are paradoxical in nature. Here is Friedrich Nietzsche's submission below.

Friedrich Nietzsche one of the 19th century German philosophers who raised an attack on the concept of evil that; "evil should be abandoned because it is dangerous". This is because: it does not describe a moral reality, but instead, is merely used to demonize enemies; it has negative effects on human potential and vitality by promoting the weak in spirit and suppressing the strong. On this, (Nietzsche 1886) argued that:

"The concept of evil arose from the negative emotions of envy, hatred, and resentment (he uses the French term resentment to capture an attitude that combines these elements). He contends that the powerless and weak created the concept of evil to take revenge against their oppressors. Nietzsche believes that the concepts of good and evil contribute to an unhealthy view of life which judges



relief from suffering as more valuable than creative self-expression and accomplishment. For this reason, Nietzsche believes that we should seek to move beyond judgments of good and evil”

Even though, four arguments were raised against Nietzsche’s opinion and the arguments were in favour of the concept of evil that: we should not abandon the concept of evil because only the concept of evil can capture the moral significance of acts, characters, and events such as sadistic torture, serial killers, Hitler, and the Holocaust (Haybron 2002, p.260), (Garrard and McNaughton 2012, p.13). The second one is that, it is only by facing evil, i.e. by becoming clear about its nature and origins that we can hope to prevent future evils from occurring and live good lives (Kekes 1990). Thirdly, by categorizing actions and practices as evil helps to focus our limited energy and resources. If evils are the worst sorts of moral wrongs, we should prioritize the reduction of evil over the reduction of other wrongs such as unjust inequities. Fourthly, by categorizing actions and practices as well we are better able to set limits to legitimate responses to evil. The reason is that, having a greater understanding of the nature of evil we are better able to guard against responding to evil with further evils (Card 2002, p. 7-8).

Methodology: ResearchDesign-

Descriptive survey method was adopted and structured questionnaire was used as the tool for data collection. The questions were carefully designed and unambiguous. **Population of the study-** This consists of Yoruba indigenes (Christians, Muslims and Traditional worshippers) within Mushin LGA, Lagos State. Their age bracket is from 20 - 70 years. The churches concerned were mainly, evangelical, Pentecostal and indigenous churches.

Sample and sample techniques- It consists of five hundred respondents chosen from ten different churches, two Islamic sects and three traditional worshippers. The questionnaire was randomly distributed among them.

Instrument: The Instrument for the research is questionnaire designed by the researcher and distributed to people based on the population stated above.

Method of data collection: The six hundred questionnaires was administered through field assistance among the people of Mushin LGA, only five hundred copies were retrieved for use.

Method of data analysis: The methods used for data analysis was: mean score, frequency counts and percentages. These percentages were used in computation of the data collected.

Summary of findings: From the data analysis, the following were discovered: the long and widely accepted people’s belief is fallible on the notion that God is to be blamed on the occurrence of evil, however, neither God nor human should be indicted; the concept of evil and goodness is a fact not a farce in Yoruba philosophical thought; evil is part of human’s existence in Yoruba beliefs; goodness and evil are both instigated by God; human chooses evil and goodness from heaven; people agreed that God is not the cause of evil but man been a free moral agent; both Western and African most especially Yoruba concept of evil and goodness are the same; Yoruba belief that Deities are also causing evil and goodness; more so, fatalism, determinism and hard-determinism are not solutions to the occurrence of evil in life.



Conclusion

Although, a lot of occurrences that transpire in the lives of humans, and on earth have been attributed to moral and natural evil or goodness; the concept of evil and goodness, how it impinges, cannot be understated because several human actions and inactions can be traced to either of them. In the Yoruba-African context, evil is understood as originating from or associated with spiritual beings besides God. Part of this cosmological explanation is a personification of evil itself. The point in the foregoing Yoruba notion of evil is that it is distinct from its Western counterpart which juxtaposes the existence of evil with the existence of God and considers the former as veritable negation of the latter. The Yoruba-African view separates the existence of evil from the existence of God. The view takes Esu as the progenitor of evil because it works through chaos; he is still capable of doing good. As much as the Yoruba does not deny the existence of evil nor believes in using superfluous arguments to counter the existence of God, it could be argued that there is a dialectical and not diametrical relationship between good and evil in Yoruba thought. It is an accepted fact that evil exists in the world and from Yoruba philosophical thought, it is believed that all sufferings come as a result of sin, as bad character attracts evil while good character attracts goodness.

Yoruba traditional belief holds that *Ori* (Head) determines the fate of man; he chooses evil and goodness from heaven (that is destiny), meaning that destiny is the combination of both evil and good. Although, people disagreed that fatalism is the solution to every occurrence in life. The belief that evil and good originates from Olodumare (God) in Yoruba philosophy is fallible, because Yoruba still believe that Esu (Devil) is the intermediary between man and God; carrier of evilness and goodness to human being on earth. That is why Yoruba people still worship Esu as small god that is capable of bringing both evil and good to them. Though, Oguntola (2017) attacked this notion that it is Christianity and Islamic religions that is the problem of traditional religion by misunderstanding the personality of Esu. He portrayed Esu as not the cause agent of evil, that evil are possible only with the approval of God and evil is caused by God for good purposes. Yoruba do not perceive the existence of evil as a sufficient reason to discredit the existence of God. Rather, they absolve God of certain blames on the existence of evil in the world.

Recommendations: This paper presents the following recommendations that: human beings should desist from blaming God for any evil experience occurred as a result of human's fault. God gave humans freewill and this gift is routinely abused; human beings must understand that if there were no evil, then the concept of 'good' would not have been positively established; people must understand that Satan is responsible for evil; people must understand that each instance of evil (*ibi*) prevents a greater evil (*ibi*) from occurring, or serves as a necessary precondition for a greater good (*ire*); finally, people must understand that the (*Ori*) is the determinant of whatever happens to humans in life and it plays major roles in determining the fate of man.



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